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OR,

THE TWINS of TIP-TOP.

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AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "DAN BROWN OF DEN-
VER," "MONTE JIM," "THE THOROUGH-
BRED SPORT," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MOUNTAIN MENDICANT.

"Ef ye ever knowed what it was to be starv-in', mum! Ef ye ever went hungry so long that ye was holler clean through—so holler fer lack o' grub-fillin' that every time ye drawed breath the raw wind started chilblains on the inside soles o' yer two hoofs—beggin' pardon fer the word, which I ort to said angel s'porters!"

With a clumsy bow and a fawning smile spreading over his flushed, bloated face, the fellow shuffled a little nearer, one grimy paw deftly securing the mustang by the bit, almost before its fair mistress divined his purpose.

The tinge of healthful color deepened a little on her cheeks, but even yet it was more in annoyance than in anger. As for fear, such an

WITH A FRIGHTFUL SORT OF FASCINATION BOTH WATCHED THE TREE AS IT CAME CLOSER,
THE BUTT NOW POINTED ALMOST DIRECT FOR THEIR REFUGE.

idea had not yet occurred to Jessamine Clare, though she was in a lonesome spot, and this mountain mendicant was anything but a desirable companion.

She was used to these long and lonely excursions, and even when the country round and about the flourishing mining-town of Tip-Top was much more wild and unfrequented than now, Jessamine lightly laughed to scorn all thoughts of danger, and without escort or companion, rode daily far and wide through the hills and hollows, and up to the present time she had never met with an adventure more exciting or dangerous than an odd slip or stumble of her sure-footed mustang; but this day was fated to prove the exception.

Lost in a reverie that ought to have been very pleasing, judging from the smile about her red lips and the lustrous yet soft light in her great dark eyes, she had given her pony its head, permitting it to pick its own path through the roadless hills.

Her day-dream was rudely dispelled. With a snort her horse stopped abruptly, its sharp ears pricked forward, the picture of equine suspicion.

A ragged, dirty, disreputable figure barred the way, though without making any positive show of ill-will.

"Ef the good Lawd hain't sent ye, mum, then I want to know!" huskily uttered the tramp, rolling his bleared eyes upward as in thankfulness. "Sent ye jest as I was on the p'int o' givin' up to never-git-over it! Jest as I was layin' me down fer to kick the bucket 'long o' hungry starvation an'—ef it hain't no more'n a dollar, mum! Two weeks ago come Sunday sence I hed a meal—an' that fit to starve the weentiest poodle-purp that ever hed the 'spespy, mum!"

Jessamine Clare cast a swift glance around, taking in the situation at a glance. The mustang had wandered far from the stage road, and when this rough-looking tramp rose up from amidst the rocks, the horse was picking its way through a narrow passage where the rocks rose on either side too abruptly, too close together for turning about. The end was just ahead, but the tramp was standing a few feet nearer, and if he chose to bar the way, escape was only possible by leaping from the saddle to the rocks above, or by riding over his person.

"I have no money for you, sir," the maiden uttered, hurriedly, only to be cut short by the speech with which this chapter commences.

"Release my horse, sir!" she flashed, the whip in her gloved right hand beginning to quiver, though the grotesquely pitiful words of this mountain mendicant served to hold her rising anger in partial check. "You are frightening him—Steady, Pet!"

"He hain't no holler bag o' wind! A peck o' sawdust wouldn't be a holy picnic to him! Fed on oats b'iled in cream, and timothy soaked in strained honey, with champagne in a bucket like water—that's the way he looks! An' me—never a bit fer two weeks come Sunday, an' livin' on mem'ry the month afore that! An' now—them hain't rings as makes your fingers look so buncby, mum!"

By this time Jessamine had fairly recovered from the sudden start given her by this unexpected encounter, and her words came more freely:

"I never carry money with me into the hills. I wear no jewelry, as you can see for yourself. Even if I did, why should that interest you, sir?"

"Makes heap good chuck, ef ye 'soak' it the right way, mum," grinned the tramp, with a wicked leer in his bleared eyes.

"If you are hungry—"

"Good Lawd!" groaned the tramp, seeming to wilt at the bare idea. "Hungry? Ef? An' me two weeks come Sunday!"

The fair rider made no immediate reply, but there was a faint smile curling her lips as her eyes roved over that figure. Ragged, dirty, disreputable enough without a doubt, but hardly the figure of a starving man. If anything, fat, with good feeding and bad whisky showing in every feature.

"Jest wind, mum," grinned the rascal, rightly interpreting that glance. "Blowed me out jest like I was a empty shirt on a line, mum."

"It is not far to town," coldly said Jessamine, passing that point by without caring to discuss it. "Food is plenty there, and if—"

The tramp gave an unsteady lurch, shaking both horse and rider, but without loosening his grasp on the bits.

"Stiddy, consarn ye!" he growled, with an ugly scowl at the mustang as it sprung back in affright. "Bad 'nough fer the leddy to be pokin' fun at a starvin' feller-critter, 'thout you—Whoa, Jinnewerry!"

The flush faded from Jessamine's cheeks now, and she began to more nearly realize the peril which threatened. An impudent tramp was bad enough, but a drunken tramp was worse.

"You are hurting the horse, sir," she uttered, sharply.

"Tain't me, mum, but the hunger," grinned the rascal, religiously sticking to his text. "Ol' hoss ain't weal nur yit chicken, but it's meat. An' ef I was to be tuck—wouldn't it be

orful? To eat a hoss, hide, bridle an' all! Wouldn't you ruther pay a sort o' ransom fer the critter, mum? Say a dollar or two—mebbe five?"

"Not one penny when demanded after this fashion, you scoundrel!" flashed the maiden, stung by the insolence of his tone and look, rather than the words he uttered. "If you are really in want, yonder lies the town, and help may be had for the asking; but—"

"Talk's cheap, but it won't buy—hic!—grub, mum," grinning broadly at the dexterity with which he substituted one word for another. "An' fer me to hit the camp clean broke, that's wuss then folly—fer why; I'd road-agent the fu'st show o' grub I run up ag'in, an' the owner'd fill me chuck up with blue pills—sabe?"

"I know that you are drunk and insolent. Will you stand aside, or must I ride you down?"

The words came coldly enough, but the dark eyes of Jessamine Clare flashed vividly and her red lips drew to a thin line as her grip tightened on the rein and whip. A sober man must have seen that there was danger behind all this, but the tramp seemed amused rather than awed, even while forcing a ferocious scowl into his fat, greasy face.

"Kin I swaller that? Kin I—ef he wasn't so nigh gone 'ith hunger an' starvation an' the likes o' them, Uncle Billy'd be rarin' right up onto his two hind laigs, clean sloppin' over 'ith 'dignation at sich a monstrous insult. Drunk? Uncle Billy? An' it's two weeks come Sunday sence he even smelt o' the cork. An'—Stiddy, you pesky cayuse! Fer two cents I'd yank the head off o' ye an' swaller it 'thout hide or cleanin'. Stiddy, or—Good Lawd!"

He jerked back his hand, clapping it under his other arm with a muffled howl of pain, shuffling from foot to foot like an overgrown schoolboy whose sins have found him out. A streak of fire seemed to flash across his knuckles, and Jessamine Clare, pale but resolute, was shaking the lithe riding-whip before his bleared eyes as she cried:

"Step back and let me pass, sir, unless you wish your face striped after the same fashion!"

A touch of the whip sent her spirited horse forward, and as Uncle Billy caught at its head again, her whip whistled through the air in deadly earnestness, cutting the dust in tiny puffs from the battered felt hat as it was driven down over his eyes. Not all the blows were parried thus, however, and the mountain tramp howled in pain and fury as he struggled with the snorting steed between the rocks.

"Cuss ye!" he panted, hoarsely, as he maintained the struggle. "I was only funnin' at fu'st, but now—now, durn ye fer a snatch-cat! Now I'll hev the wu'th o' it all out o' your—"

Swifter fell that cutting weapon, and urged on by voice and spur, the mustang plunged forward despite the weight clinging to its head, clearing the narrow passage in which its movements had been so hampered.

Not without a desperate struggle on the part of the mountain tramp, whose worst passions seemed to be awakened by the sharp punishment his insolence had brought upon him. Clinging to the leather rein with one hand, he viciously pounded the poor horse with his other fist, trying to beat him back and keep him within the passage.

Under double torture the fiery creature plunged madly forward, and as it cleared the pass the weight of the tramp on one rein broke the leather short off near the bit. Uncle Billy fell partly beneath the horse, only saved from being trampled by a glancing stroke of those muscular legs hurling him to one side.

The parting leather was no more expected by Jessamine than Uncle Billy, and she narrowly missed sharing his ignominious fate as the mustang leaped forward when so suddenly set free from the double strain upon his head. In saving herself, Jessamine dropped the broken rein. It fell to the ground, to be stepped on by the horse and snapped like a pack-thread, though the shock brought him to his knees among the rocks.

"Hold on!" howled Uncle Billy, scrambling to his feet, each hand clasping a stone which he sent whistling through the air the next moment. "Ef I be drunk, I'm sober 'nough fer to—Now you hev got it!"

Despite his blind fury, his aim had been only too true. One of the jagged missiles struck the mustang, just then recovering from its trip over the broken leg, on one hind leg, tearing open the hide and causing intense pain. The tortured creature uttered a wild snort as it flung up its head, for the first time seeming to realize its freedom, then plunging ahead to what seemed certain destruction to both itself and mistress.

Mistress no longer, as Jessamine Clare quickly realized. And though her tones were clear and firm enough as she sought to bring the poor brute under control by those means, her heart seemed chilling within her bosom as she recognized the course her steed was taking.

"The river—the gulch!" came from her paling lips. "Is there no help? Must we go down there?"

That awful fear caused her brain to whirl, her lungs to choke. A painful haze seemed to

flash across her eyes, shutting out all but a misty gleam of the rocks and bushes through and over which the maddened horse was plunging. Instinctively her hands closed on the saddle-horn, even as she panted wildly:

"I must leap—now—soon 'twill be too late!"

Yet even in that horribly confused minute, she knew that to leap from the saddle meant death or broken limbs.

CHAPTER II.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

"MERCIFUL heaven! have pity!"

Hoarse and chokingly came the supplication from those blanched lips as their owner stood spellbound, gazing upon the frightful peril which menaced the being whom, above all others on earth, he loved.

It was a faint hope of encountering Jessamine Clare that led Mark Mason to abandon his post of duty for the afternoon, leaving town to bury himself amidst the hills so loved by the fair maiden; but never had he dreamed of such a meeting as this!

The rapid clatter of hoofs had startled him from a half reverie, and swiftly leaping upon a point of rocks to extend his view, he beheld the maddened mustang as it bore its pale, helpless rider along to what seemed certain death. And that one glance showed him the woman he loved so ardently, so hopelessly as he often told himself.

Like a flash it all came to him; the entire scene was pictured upon his brain as a sensitive plate receives a landscape.

Not two score rods ahead of that pain and fear blinded mustang lay the deep bed of Roaring Fork, crossing its course almost at right angles. Unless Jessamine could regain control—

"God help her!" he groaned, shivering like a leaf as he covered his eyes with both hands.

He saw the dangling fragments of the reins, and knew how hopeless was that idea. Even were the maiden to bend far along the mad steed's neck, she could not grasp those useless bits of leather.

Only for an instant did the young man stand cowering there, unnerved by the frightful peril which menaced his loved one. With a wild and hardly articulate cry he sprung from the rock and dashed rapidly down the hill, though even a lover could not hope to reach that swiftly fleeing shape in time to avail aught.

"Lost—doomed!" he panted, suffering worse than death himself in viewing her peril. "With you, darling—united, even in death!"

He was hardly responsible for his thoughts, poor fellow!

For years he had loved this maiden, silently, from a distance, almost as a dreamer might worship a brightly gleaming star in the heavens above, rather than as a man loving a woman whom he might hope to win and wear. And now that he saw death about to claim her, now that he felt her span of life was breaking forever, he felt a strangely wild, strangely sweet joy and pain commingled; in death they would be wed!

Unheeding his own peril as he plunged down the rugged hill, his eyes fixed upon the maiden as her blinded steed rushed with her to the death-trap, Mark Mason shouted aloud:

"The river! Jump—for your life, jump off!"

His words reached her ears above the clattering of those hoofs, above the sullen roaring of the river as it tumbled over its rocky bed. She partly turned in the saddle, stretching out her arms toward the man who loved her so madly, her pale face lighting up with a transient flush, her dark eyes filling with a light that—Ah, could Mark Mason have seen and recognized that light?

She recognized the speaker, but if his words carried any meaning to her ears, it came too late for obedience. The tortured mustang had covered those painfully few rods, and was now almost on the brink of the precipice.

It seemed to recognize the danger, for it reared aloft, pawing the air madly with its forefeet, turning as on a pivot despite its frantic speed. But the effort was in vain. Its hoofs slipped on the rock, and with a frightful scream, the mustang fell, sliding, rolling over the escarpment.

The shock flung Jessamine from the saddle, and she fell upon a small clump of bushes which grew on the edge of the bank. A sharp cry parted her lips, and Mark Mason fancied he caught his own name, even as he saw the bushes yield beneath her weight, and that loved figure vanish from his sight, following the doomed steed over the rocky bank.

He saw this, and the sight seemed to rob his limbs of their strength. They gave way beneath him, and with a choking groan of indescribable agony of mind, he sank to the rocks, a trembling, nerveless heap.

Over the brink!

He knew so well what that must mean! He recalled so distinctly the deep bed, the sullenly roaring waters pent up in that rocky channel so contracted there where the waters had eaten a way through the ridge. Even if she had fallen clear of the jagged rocks which scarred the face of the precipice, could she have escaped death in the deep waters below?

There could be no hope, and yet—with that thought, Mark Mason fought back his dizziness and rose to his feet. He staggered as he moved, until one might have thought him under the influence of strong waters. He tripped over a trailing vine. His face was ghastly in its pallor, and there was a look of death upon his countenance as he drew near the brink at the point where the broken bushes marked the spot where Jessamine Clare had fallen down to—

"Mark—help!"

The young man started as though shot, dashing a trembling hand across his eyes as that faint, broken appeal came to his ears. He was going mad. The dead cannot speak, and she was dead!

Again his name came floating up from the rocky cleft, and this time there could be no deception. It was indeed the voice of the maiden he loved, appealing to him for aid.

He tried to shout forth an answer, but only a hoarse, inarticulate sound escaped his white lips. He rushed forward, bending dangerously over the escarpment, to utter a choking cry of glad thankfulness as he saw, only a few feet below him, Jessamine Clare, alive, seemingly unhurt.

The seeming miracle is readily explained. That friendly bush on the brink had not only broken her fall as she was hurled from the saddle, but it had held her weight long enough to check her outward impulse, permitting her to drop directly downward.

To land upon a bending bush which checked her further descent long enough to permit her to grasp its stem with a grip strengthened by desperation. And now, with her toes supported by a tiny projection in the rocky face, the maiden looked imploringly yet confidingly up into the pale face of the man who loved her above life.

"You will save me—I can wait, Mr. Mason," she said, her tones seemingly calm and even under such circumstances.

It was just what was needed most by the young man, for it served to steady his own shaken nerves, and with a clear, keen glance he took in the whole situation.

That glance showed him what Jessamine had not as yet suspected, and his face turned even paler than before. The bush to which she was clinging was beginning to give way near its roots!

The slender stem was beginning to split, showing its white wood through the bark.

Only for this, his actions would have been widely different, his task much simpler, since his stout knife could quickly have fashioned a rude ladder, or stout hook after the fashion familiar to many country homes in drawing water. Even as it was he cast a swift glance around him, but no such sapling was within sight, and he dared not wait to hunt for one.

The bush to which Jessamine clung was nearly twenty feet below the level on which he stood, and even if her strength was equal to the strain, his garments could hardly reach her if formed into a rude rope. Nor was there any point to which he could attach such a rope, for her to hold by while he made his way to her side.

"I will save you, Miss Clare," he forced himself to utter, and feeling a curious wonder at the cold steadiness of his own tones while his heart was throbbing so fiercely with mingled love and dread.

There was only one chance, and that a risky one, but he accepted it without a fear for himself.

He ran a few feet to the left, grasping a twisted root and lowering himself over the escarpment until his feet felt the narrow ledge which promised a safe passage to his imperiled love.

This was only the first step, and by far the easiest. He had to lower himself, foot by foot, clinging to the points of rock or digging his fingers into the cracks which offered. And with each foot of progress made, his hope of ultimate escape sunk deeper and deeper. If he found it so difficult a task while free and unencumbered, what would it be when that precious life was added?

He dared not stop to reflect on this. His greatest fear was lest that shock-weakened bush should yield entirely, hurling the maiden down to the sullen waters far below.

He reached the ledge which he had marked from above, and which ran along the face of the cliff to within less than two feet of where Jessamine Clare hung in suspense. It was broad enough to afford tolerably comfortable footing, though the frost-eaten rock crumbled and scaled slightly beneath his weight.

Just before gaining the bed of the ledge, or where he might touch his loved one, Mark had to make a long step from one rock point to another, and in doing so came terribly near meeting his death then and there. The point from which he stepped suddenly gave way beneath his weight, scaling off from the cliff and clattering down the white rocks to plunge into the river below.

He felt it yield, and hastily stepped forward, his fingers seeking for a support in advance, only to slip from the smooth surface. And he felt that his balance was being destroyed, that

some invisible power was slowly, surely drawing him backward, downward, to death.

Something of this must have showed in his face, though he strove to school his features, for with a look of horror in her own face, Jessamine Clare released one hand, reaching out and touching his extended arm. Slight though her powers under such a strain, it was sufficient to turn the scale, and Mark Mason steadied himself once more, muttering in strained tones:

"I owe you my life, Miss Clare!"

Jessamine laughed, a little hysterically it must be admitted, as she once more grasped the splintering bush.

"And you will save mine, so we will both be debtors, Mr. Mason."

"I will save you, or share your fate," was his simple response.

He did not take note of the soft flush which tinged her cheek at that, for his gaze was turned backward, to end in clinching his jaws tightly, a gleam of despair leaping into his eyes.

The ledge by which he had hoped to retreat with his precious charge no longer existed.

Some five feet of the ledge had broken off beneath his weight, and even without incumbrance he could not hope to pass the gap.

He cast a keen, searching glance above and around them, but he was unable to catch even a ray of hope. The only path by which that spot could be gained or left, was destroyed!

He turned his face toward Jessamine, trying to force a smile, but her perceptions were too sharp for such a poor pretense, and the old dread flashed back into her eyes as she murmured:

"There is no way! No hope! And you—why did you come to perish with me?"

In silence Mark extended his right arm until his hand touched her erect figure, lending her the support she so sadly needed. Owing to his own precarious position this was a terrible strain upon his muscles, but he never gave that a thought just then. His eyes were fixed on the splintering stem above her head, and his despair deepened as he saw the white wood still more clearly through the parting bark.

He believed that death for both was inevitable, try as he might to avert or postpone it, and that belief gave him courage to utter the words which, under different circumstances, he might never have spoken.

"Why did I come, Jessamine?" his voice deep yet soft, and full of passion. "Because life is worth nothing without you! Because I love you, my darling!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BOSS OF TIP-TOP.

"THANKS, Miss Mason," with a bow and a half-laugh as he received the neat package across the counter. "Shall I hint that I'm planning a treat for my neighbor's children, or tell the simple truth?"

Annie Mason murmured something in reply, though Andrew Griffin's ears must have been keen indeed if he rightly interpreted its meaning. A rosy blush suffused her cheeks, and the package dropped between the two hands. And, somehow, their fingers became entangled together just long enough for the stronger ones to impart a gentle pressure before they parted, quickened in this, possibly, by the peculiar, cracked voice of the third occupant of the little bakery.

"The truth's good enough for us, sir, if you reckon you kin stand it," pointedly said Sally Bunch, drawing a bit nearer, with a ludicrous resemblance to a mother hen who fancies her one lone chick in peril.

"Then I'll tell the truth and shame—my appetite," laughed Griffin, lifting the package so that, for a brief space, it covered that almost painful blush from those keen little eyes. "I am the only child in question, mine the only sweet tooth. My mother—Heaven rest her soul!" his voice growing lower, graver, his dark eyes involuntarily flashing upward for an instant—"My mother used to bake just such cookies, and it seems impossible for me to get enough of them now."

Annie Mason lifted a shy glance toward his face, a certain emotion in her own eyes, but which their lids were swift to vail as she caught his respectfully admiring gaze. Only for that—only for that silly tremor which would overcome her whenever this man caught her gaze—she felt that she could murmur a few words of sympathy. He, too, had lost a mother. He, too, missed the warm, tender heart where comfort and security always lies.

Sally Bunch was made of far different metal, however, and there was little save grim business in her prompt observation:

"They ain't nothin' impossible, an' ef you bed a appetite like a elephant, sir, we could fill it up to overflowin'. At reg'lar rates, o' course, sir!" with a grim little nod of her becapped head.

Sidling along behind the counter Sally gently pushed Annie away, taking her place much as she might have stepped between a hungry panther and her beloved charge. Some such thought as this flashed across the mind of Andrew Griffin, and if he felt annoyance at having his too

brief interview cut short, he was too gentlemanly to show it in face or voice. With a bright, half-quizzical smile he said:

"Then—how many dozen cookies would it be safe for me to order per diem, Mistress Bunch?"

"Jest as many as you kin safely pay for, sir," briskly.

Griffin could not refrain from laughing outright at this purely business view of the matter. It was so thoroughly Sally Bunch! But if he had really hoped to soften and placate this grim little dragon by such means, that laugh lost him all hopes on that occasion.

"They ain't no nonsense 'bout me," Sally was wont to declare, with emphasis, "nur I ain't goin' to stand any nonsense 'bout my little pretty—no I ain't, now! Business is business, an' we've got to make a livin' or starve. Jest so, fur I'm willin' to let men critters come 'bout the place, bein' they're the ones that's got the money an' do the spendin'; but right that the line is drawn—drawed deep!"

For Sally Bunch was a most emphatic masher, and if she tolerated even Mark, Annie's twin brother, it was because he was Annie's brother. Only for that touch of leavening grace, he would be just as bad as all the rest of his sex!

Suspicious of all mankind, then, it is hardly to be wondered at that Sally Bunch should be particularly so of this handsome, dandified stranger who called so frequently, but who lingered longer over his purchases when Annie chanced to be the one to wait upon him.

"Of all things them sort is the wu'st!" grimly frowned Sally, hardly daring to openly lecture her fair charge, but pointing her meaning just the same. "A man-milliner! With his perfoomery! An' his silk hat! An' his broidered handkercher! An' his—ugh! it gives me the cold shivers jest to look! A painted sarpint o' wickedness, I jest know!"

She had softened a little since that first day, for even her rigidly incased heart was not quite proof against such pleasant smiles, such respectful tones, such liberal patronage; but she never omitted forming the third position whenever Andrew Griffin entered the shop.

Andrew Griffin turned toward Annie, resolved to make the best of it, and to draw her into the conversation if possible. Somehow he longed to meet those lustrous eyes just once more, to see if he had been mistaken in reading the light which shone from their depths in that shy, fleeting glance.

"You shall decide, Miss Mason," he said, for lack of a better expedient. "It would be cruel to oblige you to spend too much time simply that my appetite—"

"Ketch me lettin' her!" sniffed Sally Bunch, her cap ribbons fluttering sharply as her head tossed at the mere idea. "Them cookies is my makin' an' my bakin', sir, even ef the sayin' so do spile a good trade. Anythin' more to-day, sir?"

Sharper than ever came the last words, for Sally felt that she had made an awkward slip in her grim sarcasm. Big' fool she for letting this dandy see how clearly she had penetrated his scheme!

Griffin was too well bred to show aught in his face, but poor Annie was blushing furiously, and none was more greatly relieved than she at the abrupt entrance of another gentleman—one whose large frame seemed to fairly crowd the little shop.

"Your servant, Miss Annie," with a low bow, then nodding briefly to the elder lady, as he added: "Yours, Aunt Sally."

Annie Mason bowed, with a low murmur. Sally Bunch curtsied as perfectly as the narrow space behind the counter would permit, though her little eyes flashed and her thin lips grew narrower at that too-familiar title dropping from such lips.

"At your service, Nephew Clare."

The new-comer started at that crisp response, his eyes opening widely, only to half-close under a short, forced laugh as he caught the point. His massive face flushed behind its mask of silken beard, and there was more of respect and deference in his deep tones as he said:

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Bunch. The title slipped out before I was aware. I have heard Mark call you aunt so often that—"

"Slip for slip, an' I do reckon mine was the longest, Mr. Clare, though I hev knowed some folks as hed nephews older than themselves."

Jasper Clare turned abruptly toward Annie, asking:

"Mark is not in, Miss Mason?"

"No, sir. I thought he went to the office, as usual."

"I told him there was nothing particular to do, and that he might knock off for the day, but I just happened to think—Never mind. It can wait until morning, or I may happen to chance past this evening."

At the entrance of this gentleman, whom he recognized as the most influential business man in Tip-Top, Andrew Griffin quietly drew aside, though giving no signs of taking his departure. Though his gaze was vailed, his keen eyes were carefully studying the face of Jasper Clare, his own growing hard and cold as he did so.

True, it might be simple chance, but this was

not the first time by several that the Boss of Tip-Top had abruptly surprised him at that counter. Was it as a man, or as a possible lover, that Jasper Clare was watching his movements?

Before he had time to answer this self-imposed query, Jasper Clare turned toward him to utter: "Good-afternoon, Mr. Griffin. Meeting you reminds me—I believe I have a letter belonging to you."

"To me?" with arching brows. "Are you certain, sir?"

"That it is directed to Andrew Griffin, at any rate," a little stiffly. "I intended to have returned it to the office, as it was plainly delivered by mistake with my mail, but it slipped my mind until I caught sight of you just now. I can do so now, unless you prefer to walk back with me."

"Don't you let me take you out of your way, Mr. Clare."

"Not at all," briskly. "I was on my way home when I chanced to glimpse you in here. Miss Annie, my Jess' was wondering this very morning what had become of you, of late. You will require an introduction to the home-place if you wait much longer!"

"It ain't everybody that has spare time fer gaddie', Mr. Clare," stiffly lobbed Sally Bunch, taking upon herself to answer.

"I will try to find time for a short call, sir," murmured Annie, blushing afresh, but more because her eyes chanced to meet those of the "man-milliner," as Aunt Sally saw fit to dub Andrew Griffin.

The two gentlemen left the little shop in company, walking briskly through the town toward the residence of the mining-magnate, Jasper Clare briefly giving his theory as to how the letter chanced to come into his possession.

That was simple enough. His mail was usually large, and though he kept what, in a more pretentious man, might be called a private secretary, Mark Mason, it was his invariable habit to inspect all letters and documents first.

"I found that letter among my mail yesterday, I think, and laid it aside to return to the office, though I felt sure it must belong to you. I knew of no other Griffin in Tip-Top."

"Doubtless it belongs to me. Thanks for your taking care of it," was the quiet response.

But though he seemed so cool and unconcerned on the outside, Andrew Griffin felt ill at ease in his mind. Though he had no particular reason for mistrusting this man—why should he have?—somehow he felt that he would have preferred that letter to have fallen into almost any other pair of hands.

And yet, hardly a soul in all Tip-Top but would have scoffed at the idea of Jasper Clare doing aught wrong, even to his worst enemy.

He was credited with being by far the richest man in all that section, owning mining property far and near, some of which brought him in an almost princely income. But, as they would pause to affirm, every dollar of his wealth had been honestly gained, every act that of an upright, manly man.

Nor had Andrew Griffin discovered aught since his arrival in Tip-Top to counteract this general estimate. Indeed, his attention had only been drawn toward Jasper Clare, since his too obvious intrusions, the nature of which has just been hinted at.

Strong though the contrast was between them in almost every respect, the two men formed a handsome couple as they passed through the almost deserted streets of the mining-town. Jasper Clare, tall, broad-shouldered, admirably built though on such an extensive scale, looked all over the prosperous business man of the flourishing West. While his garments were of rich material and well-fitted to his muscular shape, they were worn with a careless, half-reckless dash such as marks the Westerner alone.

His beard was almost patriarchal, his hair drooping almost to his square shoulders beneath his slouched hat of gray felt.

On the other hand, Andrew Griffin—"Dandy Andy," as he had already been dubbed by the "sports" of Tip-Top—partly justified the title given him by scornful Sally Bunch. Of little over medium size and height, he looked fresh and neat as though "just out of a bandbox," to use the vernacular. His attire was that of a fashionable man fresh from Broadway, and the only objection which could be brought against him on the score of strict good taste, was his habit of wearing so many diamonds: on finger, in his shirt-bosom and his scarf-ring.

A few minutes sufficed to carry the two men to the Clare residence, and without meeting any one by the way, they soon stood in the cool, shaded library which Jasper Clare used as an office. He handed Andrew Griffin a sealed envelope, which was carelessly glanced at before being slipped into a pocket. But brief as was that glance, it showed the dandy one startling fact: the letter had been tampered with!

CHAPTER IV.

DANDY ANDY IN THE SADDLE.

"I was right, then, in fancying the letter belongs to you?" asked Jasper Clare, with just a touch of curiosity visible in his eyes as they keenly watched the other.

"It is my name, plain enough," nodded Griffin. "I'm not sure I recognize the handwriting, but that is not so strange. For a man on a simple pleasure trip I have considerable correspondence."

"Looking for an investment, I dare say?"

"Not exactly, though should anything extra nice fall in my way I might stoop to pick it up," with a low laugh. "Thanks for your trouble, dear sir."

"Never mention it. It cost me nothing," was the frank response. "But you are not going? Won't you have a cigar? Possibly I can point out the road to that good thing," with a short laugh.

"Thanks, but I'll have to postpone the pleasure for now," bowed Griffin, turning to leave the room.

"Well, if you *must* rush. But any time you want to look over a fair prospect or two, remember I'm always on deck, with a full assortment."

Nothing could be more natural, more frank and cheery than this address, yet in spite of it all Andrew Griffin felt vaguely conscious of the fact that this big fellow would far rather have a closed hand at his throat!

Jasper Clare followed him to the door, and stood there watching Dandy Andy as he walked leisurely toward his hotel, one side of which was just visible from the Clare mansion. Instinct told Griffin as much, and though he could not say with truth that this man was his enemy, or that he had any real cause for suspicion against him, he deemed it wise to betray no haste in his retreat.

"Does he really suspect anything?" mused Griffin, his brows contracting with the ugly doubts. "Can he have dropped to my purpose in Tip-Top? If so—if he really suspects what I am working for—has he any object in working against me?"

Only for that misdelivered letter that seemed to fairly burn in his pocket, Dandy Andy would have promptly negatived each and all of these questions. But now!

"The letter has plainly been tampered with! I saw as much at a glance. By clumsy bands, too, if the letter was intended to ever fall into my hands. But—did Clare do the work?"

It was a hard knot to untangle, and Griffin was still puzzling over it when he entered the hotel and hastened at once to his room. Not until the door was safely locked behind him did he draw the letter from its place of hiding, to glance again at the broken seal.

He was right. The envelope had been steamed and opened cleverly enough, though this care had been negatived by the manner in which the flap had been gummed down again.

His frown deepened as he noted the date of the receiving stamp. The date was four days before, yet Jasper Clare had stated plainly that the letter came to his eyes only the day previous.

"A willful lie, or a mere slip of the tongue, dear sir?" grimly muttered Griffin as he cut one end of the envelope open with a pen-knife. "All the same, I'll keep the proof intact, and if—Curse the luck!"

Fiercely, almost viciously the words parted his lips as his keen eyes caught the boldly written name at the end of the letter. And as he swiftly mastered the contents, his frown deepened until all trace of effeminacy vanished from his handsome face.

"Two days—and this is four days behind! It may be too late to stop him, but I've got to do my level best!"

As he muttered these words, Dandy Andy thrust the letter back into his bosom and hastily left the chamber, descending the narrow flight of stairs almost at a bound, though his flushed countenance calmed as by magic before he entered the office where the landlord met him with a bland bow of welcome. Naturally enough, for though he drank but little himself, Andrew Griffin was unusually free with his money, and there were never lacking several thirsty souls about the bar.

"Will you have my horse brought around, landlord?" softly said the smiling guest, half stifling a yawn with one jeweled hand. "I am growing so sleepy that I really must take a little jaunt or go to bed. And that would be ridiculous, don't you know?"

"Have him 'round in two minutes, Mr. Griffin."

The delay was hardly more, but brief as it was, Dandy Andy found time to run up to his chamber and don a suit more favorable for the saddle than the one he had been wearing. And as he leaped lightly into the saddle without touching the stirrup, he seemed fairly born on horseback.

The animal was a spirited one, though under good control, and more than one pair of eyes gazed admiringly after the rider as he dashed rapidly through the town. To the owner of one charming pair Dandy Andy tipped his hat in passing, and for a brief space a smile chased the hard light from his keen eyes.

Only for a few moments, however, then they grew hard and even dangerous with the fire that filled their depths.

"Is that the prime cause? Can Clare suspect? Is he thinking to capture the rare prize even be-

fore I can prove its identity? Lucky I never mentioned a name, else the major would surely have crammed it into this infernal letter!"

By this time the dashing rider was fairly clear of the town, heading toward the broken hills of mighty rocks, following the stage-trail. There was little likelihood of any person noting his actions, but his native and acquired caution led him to cast keen, searching looks about him, making sure no person was near at hand, before taking the crumpled letter from the inner pocket into which he had thrust it after one hasty perusal.

"What does he write, anyway? How much has he let out? Enough to set whoever cribbed it on guard, no doubt!" with a bitter smile.

After the date-line and address, the letter read as follows:

"I write this in such haste that I have no time to tell you all. Enough that I am convinced you have been following up the wrong clew, even though it has chanced to lead you into the right quarter. There is only one child left living, I am assured by one who claims to know all; but whether that is a boy or girl, he cannot say for certain.

"I dare not wait to hear from you. I shall reach Summit, if I make all connections, on the 9th. I will wait there two days to hear from or see you in answer to this hasty note. Then I shall proceed at once to Tip-Top, by stage.

"I shall be alone, thanks to an unfortunate accident at Omaha, by which I was forced to leave my informant behind. He has given me directions by which I trust we may complete the work, vague though they may appear to you.

"Of this one fact I am almost certain: only one of the twins is now alive, but unto that one full and complete re-stitution must and shall be made, though it leaves me a beggar for the rest of my life!

"I know nothing of Summit, but I shall stop at the principal hotel, if such the town can afford. At all events, I will wait two days for your coming. At the end of that period, unless I see or hear from you, expect me at Tip-Top. Meantime, drop the clew you have been working, for it is a false one!"

"In great haste,

"MARION WILCOX."

Dandy Andy drew a long breath as he finished perusing this hurried communication, replacing it in its envelope and returning it to an inner pocket for security.

"It might have been worse, but it's bad enough!" with a fleeting frown as he glanced once more around him. "Even in his haste he tried to write guardedly, but he has let fall more than enough to put an enemy on the right track I'm afraid. If I only knew for certain whose hand tampered with the letter! If not Jasper Clare—who? And if he, why deliver the letter at all? Why not destroy it and thus avert all suspicion?"

This was another knotty point, no less difficult to comprehend than the other.

"If Clare, it can hardly be that the love of money is making him stir in the case. Is it any other sort of love? Can he suspect what powerful reason first drew my attention toward the little bakery? God bless the darling!"

Full of impulse came the ejaculation, and Dandy Andy burst into a half-sheepish laugh as he realized how ludicrous they sounded in that connection; but of course he meant that blessing to fall upon the fair genius of the bakery.

He pressed on briskly through the rough, rocky tangle, sticking closely to the stage-road. He knew that the stage coach from Summit was nearly due, and his frown gradually lightened as he reflected that, after all, he was in time to prevent Major Marion Wilcox from entering Tip-Top.

"It might do no harm, but I don't care to run the risk. His is not a face readily forgotten, and if old Mason should come back, or if Aunt Sally should take the alarm, it might cause serious trouble. Confound his clews!" with darkening frown as he sent his good horse thundering across the bridge spanning Roaring Fork and speeding along the level of the mountain, locally known as "The Flume."

As ugly a bit of staging as one could find in a long month's search, this Flume, and before that day ended, Dandy Andy, "The Diamond Detective," as he was better known toward the rising sun, was fated to fully realize its perils.

"And yet—if he should be right! If I have been following a blind lead! If—for my own sake, I could almost wish my particular twin was other than one of the long-lost children!"

Detective, man-hunter, criminal-trailor though he was through deliberate choice, Andrew Griffin was still very human in many respects, and he was betraying as much just now.

Following what he deemed a positive clew to a long-buried wrong, he had come across the life-path of a fair young maiden, the first of her sex whom he felt he could love as one loves the woman one desires for a wife. And now—

He gave a start, flinging back his head with every sense on the keen alert, gazing up the narrow trail which almost overhung the rock-strewn bed of Roaring Fork. For even above the sullen roaring of the picturesque waterfall not far below his present position, Dandy Andy distinctly caught the rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs.

"The stage!" he ejaculated, his face growing almost rigid as he touched his horse with the

spur, urging it rapidly up the incline in order to gain the niche which was cut in the solid rock, thus giving space sufficient for teams to pass each other on the trail. "Is Jerry Drane drunk again? Drunk or crazy?"

He paused in the niche, gazing anxiously ahead to where the narrow passage down the mountain took an abrupt curve, similar to the one which he had passed not many rods below where he stood in waiting.

"The fool hasn't rough-locked!" as he failed to catch the harsh, grating screech which inevitably accompanies the passage of a "shoe-lock" over a rocky trail. "Something has happened—the team is running away!"

Even as the last words passed his lips the mules came tearing around the curve, the stage swaying and threatening to plunge over the unguarded brink. And he had barely time to note that the driver's seat was empty, when he caught sight of a bare, gray head thrust out of the window in the door on the inner side of the trail. Only a glimpse, but that was sufficient for his keen eyesight, and he hoarsely cried:

"Major Wilcox! God help him—if I can't!"

CHAPTER V.

"GET THEE BEHIND ME, SATAN!"

"THAT'S what! It's a dog's life, an' no man as is a man'd let hisself be ketched dead a-folkin' of it!"

A snake-like coil ran far ahead until the silk snapped viciously at the ears of the off-leader, causing the mule to flinch and throw its weight forward.

Jerry Drane showed his snaggy teeth in a sour grin at this, and promptly made the application fit his own lamented case.

"Thar ye see it, stranger, ef ye want to look. Jest let the whip crack, an' it's jump critter or need a patch! Never mind ef ye're foot-sore or lame in the shoulder. No odds ef the harness galls or the collar chokes. Who's a-carin' ef you hain't hed a feed nur a sup fer a month o' grub-times? It's git thar, Eli, an' ef ye don't what's the reason?"

Jerry Drane threw over the brake with his heel, spitefully dropping his weight on the lever as he tightened the lines and skillfully "tooled" the "hearse" down the short but steep descent, then resumed his old air of sour dejection at the four mules once more toiled upward through the warm afternoon sun.

A pessimist from birth, Jerry Drane never felt more inclined to find fault with all things mundane than on this particular afternoon, and though his style of conversation could hardly be classed as cheering or interesting, the traveler who shared the box-seat with him seemed inclined to encourage the croaker.

"Without a word of thanks in case you perform more than your simple duty, but sharp enough to speak when you make a slip, no doubt?"

"Let 'em alone fer all that! Thanks?" and Jerry Drane actually broke into a laugh; something so strange and unusual while he occupied the box-seat that his mules crouched and sprung ahead with sudden energy, just as though they fancied their master had devised a new and ingenious method of spurring their flagging energies. "More like, dock ye a full day fer bein' sech a durned fool!"

The traveler—George Taylor he had introduced himself, soon after leaving Summit—gave a sympathetic sigh, and there was a mildly pitying light in his gray eyes as they rested upon the wrinkled, weatherbeaten face of the driver at his side.

There was nothing romantic about Jerry Drane, though he was a fair type of the mountain stage-drivers, successors to those heroes made famous in song and story as the Knights of the Overland Route; but times alter and men change with them.

Jerry was rather under-sized, and hardly a model of grace and manly beauty, being little more than a bundle of bones and muscle, held together by a parchment-like hide which apparently had but one thin spot in it. Unfortunately that was located in a most prominent part, and poor Jerry was seldom seen with his nose in a really presentable condition.

Long and thin and pointed, it projected from that foxy tangle of beard, seeming to attract and concentrate the rays of the sun upon itself, for the blistered skin was always scaling off in tiny white curls.

This was one sore point—in a double sense—with Jerry Drane, for what the sun accomplished was almost sure to be attributed to bad whisky and plenty of it. Only for that luckless nose, Jerry Drane might possibly have been a better man and more of a Christian.

George Taylor gave another sigh of sympathy as he held a fresh cigar to the not unwilling lips of the driver, striking a match and patiently assisting Jerry to secure a light without checking the progress of the stage.

Jerry grunted his thanks. He could hardly do less, for it was seldom that driver was blessed with such an agreeable companion on the box, or one who seemed to so entirely sympathize with the woes and sufferings which

form part and parcel of that profession. And yet, George Taylor was hardly one whom a stranger would select as a philanthropist.

Tall, of goodly shape, well dressed, though in rather coarse material, his long hair and bushy beard covering his face almost up to the eyes, over which drooped the brim of a felt hat, he looked more like a prosperous miner or cattleman than aught else.

"Is the life so bad as all that?" he ejaculated in shocked tones.

"Jest so bad, an' a mighty sight wuss," sourly nodded Jerry Drane as he touched up a shirking leader with the deftness born of long use. "Ef I was to talk the bark off a cast-iron gum knot I couldn't begin to tell the weeniest haf'e o' how bad the durn life is; so whar's the use in tryin'?"

"But is there no remedy? Is there no way of getting even with such tyrants?"

Jerry Drane flashed a keen glance into the face of the traveler, and something of his newborn suspicions showed in his face, but George Taylor frankly met his gaze, smiling slightly as he uttered:

"Do they add spies and spotters to the list, too, driver? Surely, the way-bill and check-list ought to be sufficient protection."

"Well, I didn't know," mumbled Jerry. "Tain't every day as we ketch onto a pilgrim as takes sech a seemin' intrust into what we no-count devils hev to stagger under. An'so—"

"You thought possibly I might be pumping you for the benefit of the proprietors, eh?" laughed Taylor, easily. "Well, you're way off this trip, pardner, and I'll tell you why: I've held the ribbons in my day, and know something of what you have to put up with. Though, to be sure, I had white men over me, and better times to drive through."

As though acting on impulse, Jerry Drane thrust lines and whip into the hands of the speaker, but it was really a shrewd test as to the truth of this assertion. Just ahead was an abrupt narrowing in the trail, where the rocks drew together until there was scant room for a stage to pass without striking a hub, the difficulty made all the worse by a sharp curve just where the pass was narrowest.

The silent challenge was instantly accepted, and as the ribbons tightened in his grasp, Taylor sharply touched up his leaders, at the same time pushing the brake back to entirely free the wheels from its friction.

Jerry gave a little start at this and clutched the railing as the mules leaped forward, but the peril was passed almost before it could be recognized. True as a die the stranger swept swiftly through the narrow pass, without so much as scratching the rocks on either side.

"Durned ef you hain't bin thar, pardner!" exclaimed Jerry Drane as Taylor smilingly resigned the lines and whip after the experiment was over. "Couldn't a' done it slicker my own self!"

"Nor bestow a greater compliment than is contained in those very words," bowed Taylor. "At least, you've got a good team, for mules."

"But they is mules, ain't they?" snapped Jerry. "Durned, ornary mules! Hosses is too good fer the likes o' us! But it's all right! We don't deserve no better. Ef we're low down 'nough fer to nigger on a hearse, we ain't high up 'nough even fer to kick. So the bosses think. But mebbe the day'll come when—Never you mind!"

"But I do mind, pardner," earnestly uttered the other. "Though I said I had a better time than you are having, it wasn't all smooth running—not a bit of it! And when matters grew too tough—well, we had a way of getting even that made a lovely hole in the profit and loss column, be sure! How? Just met with an accident, to be sure! Dumped a hearse over a bank where the smash would count hardest. And—not that I say I ever went that far, mind you, pardner! But more than once the company had to pay big damages for dead bodies and broken limbs!"

"Sarve 'em mighty right, too!" viciously nodded Jerry, letting his team take its ease up the slope which led to the head of "The Flume."

Taylor gently nudged his elbow, winking significantly as he nodded backward while whispering:

"Do you know the elderly gent inside, pardner?"

"Never see him afore."

"I have. Had quite a chat with him back at Summit, last night. He never suspected that I used to handle the ribbons, I reckon, or he'd never have talked so free and confidential as he did—not auy!"

"Then he's—" hesitated the puzzled driver.

"The biggest stockholder in this as in a dozen other stage-lines, my dear fellow," nodded Taylor, still in that curiously confidential tone. "One of the very men who bear down so hard on honest fellows like you. One of the men who grow fat by starving their drivers, and who keep their tongues limber by cursing the idle, lazy, drunken curs they have to employ to keep their schedule filled. That's what!"

Jerry Drane gave a sulky growl and cut a puff of hair from the hip of his near leader.

"Stiddy, durn ye!" as the startled animal

gave a cat-like leap forward, to be jerked back by those pliant lines. "Ef you was only him, or he was only you—wouldn't I jest!"

"He said this was the worst manned bit of the entire system," pursued Taylor, blandly. "Said he'd taken out double insurance before venturing over it, as it was a toss-up whether he got to Tip-Top all right or was tumbled over a precipice by some drunken cur. I reckon he didn't know I was going over the same route, or else he was too bad shot in the neck to care what he might say."

"Mebbe he'll git to the bottom afore he does the Tip-Top!" grimly uttered Jerry, nodding ahead to where the top of the "Flume" was just appearing in sight.

"There's room for outsiders to jump, of course!"

Jerry turned quickly toward the speaker, his little eyes opening widely, not so much at the words as at the peculiar tone in which they were uttered. But George Taylor never flinched, his own eyes glowing vividly as they met his gaze, the words dropping swiftly from his lips:

"You say the management treats you worse than a dog. You say they jump at the slightest chance to dock or fine you. They lay you off without notice, and make you do double time whenever they can arrange it that way. They make you work for a pittance, and grumble if they can't squeeze that down one-half. Then—if you could have heard the skinflint inside talk as I heard him talk last night! Well—there would be an accident before this hearse run in to Tip-Top!"

"You mean—not that you'd make one, ef you was me?" hesitated Drane, something of indignation mingling with the awed wonder in his voice; but if Taylor noted this, he made no sign.

"I mean that I'd dump hearse and team and inside passenger over the side into Roaring Fork if I was holding the ribbons!" he bluntly declared, adding in lower, but even more earnest tones as the stage fairly began its descent of the long, narrow, perilous slope: "What if you do lose your place? How much is it worth to you? Name the figures, and I'll double them ten times over!"

"You don't—"

"I just do," with sudden fierceness. "Never mind why, but I'm ready to pay any reasonable sum if you dump this hearse over the rocks at the first curve, Jerry Drane!"

"Then—ef it ain't no more'n a nasty joke, mind ye! Then—you are the dirtiest whelp out o' jail!" indignantly cried the driver, his true metal coming to the surface as he finally divined to what this glib-tongued stranger had been leading all the while. "Stiddy, mules! An' I'll punch the stuffin' out o' ye the minnit we git to level ground—ef we ever do, wuss luck me!"

The last words came sharply as he realized how that startling proposal had thrown him off his guard, causing him to begin the perilous descent without locking his wheels as usual. He only remembered this now as the stage pressed hard upon his wheelers, forcing them to a faster gait than was at all safe or comfortable either to themselves or their driver; but he had time for no more, as a sinewy hand tore the whip from his grasp while an iron-fist struck him on the side of the head, knocking him from the box so suddenly that he had not even time to utter a single cry, much less offer resistance!

CHAPTER VI.

MANUFACTURING AN ACCIDENT.

A MORE dastardly attempt at murder was never committed by mortal man, and if his effort was not entirely successful, it was not the fault of the scoundrel who had given the name of George Taylor.

The stage was fairly entered upon the long and narrow trail which hugged the mountain-side, and which was at that particular point locally known as "The Flume."

Advantage had been taken of a partial ledge, or natural furrow which marked the side of the rocky hill, though considerable digging and blasting had been required in order to convert this ledge into even a passable road.

Following the custom in all such situations, there were several points along the descent where niches or curves had been cut further into the side of the mountain, affording means for teams to pass each other, as the two curves in the road prevented a clear sight of the whole line from either top or bottom.

With the exception of these niches, the trail was not wide enough for more than one team, and at points where the rock was unusually hard, or other obstacles too difficult for surmounting, there was hardly more than the width of a broad-gauge wagon between the rocks on one side and a dizzy, almost sheer descent on the other.

In descending the slope, the precipice lay upon the right hand, and when George Taylor saw that Jerry Drane was not to be tempted into committing such a hideous crime, it looked a very simple matter for him to silence forever what might prove an ugly witness against him. A single blow would hurl him from the box, to topple over the brink. And a fall to the rocks

below would crush him out of all semblance to humanity!

"Then hunt your pay at the foot of the gulch, you cur!" came gratingly through his teeth as he snatched the whip from the luckless fellow's hand, striking him a cruel blow alongside the head, knocking him endlong from the seat.

Only an accident foiled his murderous purpose and saved Jerry Drane from pitching clear of the trail to the jagged rocks far below.

Taylor made no effort to capture the lines when he secured the whip, and instinctively clinging to these, while one foot caught for an instant on the curved top of the heavy brake-rod, Jerry Drane was kept from falling fairly clear, though he struck on his head with stunning force, and the rear wheel bounced over one of his feet.

This came so suddenly that the poor fellow had no time to utter a cry or try to foil the murderous purpose of his passenger, which was precisely what Taylor calculated upon. But in falling the driver passed near enough to the open window in the door for the solitary inside passenger to catch a glimpse of his shape, and to take the alarm.

With a sharp ejaculation of mingled wonder and fright, he thrust his head through the window, casting a single glance toward the poor fellow as he lay motionless on the rocky trail, his head fairly hanging over the brink, then cried aloud:

"Hallo! what's the matter up there?"

"Matter enough!" shouted Taylor in reply, his tones full of well-simulated despair and fear.

"Driver drunk—team running away!"

"Merciful heavens!" gasped Major Wilcox, swiftly dodging back as the stage gave a lurch toward the rough wall that threatened to dash his brains out.

Instinctively his hand had fallen to the fastening, his first thought being to throw open the door and take his chances of leaping out; but he quickly saw that such a course would be suicidal, at least on the inner side. There was hardly room for a man to stand erect and rigid between the wheels and the rock. To leap out would be to meet a horrible death beneath the heavy stage or between its iron hubs and the rough rocks.

He turned to the other side, only to shrink back paler than ever. The stage seemed on the point of pitching over the wall into that dizzy depth!

Even George Taylor turned a bit paler as the mules, forced by the weight of the heavy stage, began to move faster, breaking into a trot which must, perchance, soon become a wild gallop. But he had discounted all this in advance, and coolly set about perfecting his dastardly crime.

Gripping the whip in his teeth, he drew himself up from the box-seat to the top of the stage, pausing for a final glance. The lines were dragging on the ground, broken by the wheels or the sharp hoofs of the mules. The brake was turned back, no longer touching the wheels.

He could see nothing more there, and far ahead he could see the first curve in the trail, at which he fully expected the stage to leave the road at a tangent, to be shattered to splinters on the rocks far beneath.

"Will he bite?" he muttered, with a hard, grim smile on his face as he cautiously but rapidly slipped along over the roof of the stage. "Not that it matters much, for he'll never answer questions in this world!"

A single glance behind him, to see that poor Jerry Drane still lay as he had fallen on the rocky trail, then he wildly shrieked:

"I'm failing! Save—"

Only those words, then he dropped over the leather boot at the rear of the stage, after using the whip to strike the still-resisting wheelers a savage cut.

The result was rather more than he had calculated upon. The mules leaped forward, no longer resisting the heavy weight which pressed upon their heels, and Taylor was flung backward to fall in the trail with a force that knocked the breath from his body and fairly stunned him.

How long he lay thus, bruised and bleeding, he could never tell, for when he lifted his head, staring about him with a dazed air, the trail before him was empty, the stage had vanished from sight, and not even the clatter of hoofs or wheels came to his listening ears.

The sudden start given the stage had toppled him over so that his head struck the rocky trail first, and though he had suffered no particular injury, the shock appeared to have unsettled his brain for the time being, and his actions were those of a thoroughly dazed man.

He crawled toward the brink until he could look down upon the sun-bleached rocks lying thickly along the base of the precipice. He seemed to be vaguely searching for—what he could scarcely have explained, just at that moment.

Then, with a choking cry, he shrunk back, covering his eyes with his trembling hands, muttering incoherently.

He crept back until the drill-marked wall checked his further progress. He crouched there for several minutes, trembling like a leaf in the wind.

Gradually his confused brain grew clearer, and presently his face was uncovered, his gaze turning down the trail, wavering just a bit as his eyes noted the sharp curve, where the trail seemed to come to a sudden ending.

This sight appeared to complete his mental restoration, so far as the main facts of the case were concerned, for he started to his feet, giving his head a quick shake, drawing a long breath as he staggered down the trail, hoarsely muttering:

"They couldn't have passed that curve in safety! It's dollars to cents they pitched over right there! If so—"

The sentence was left incomplete, unless it found a finish in his own brain. And as a proof that he was rapidly recovering from that stunning fall, his glittering eyes roved swiftly about him, like one who fears his imprudent speech may have been caught by unfriendly ears.

His steps grew more steady, and as he neared the curve which he felt convinced must have proved fatal to team and passenger alike, he seemed quite himself once more, though his face showed almost ghastly pale through his thick beard.

"It's rough—infinitely rough! But why couldn't he rest content? What made him stir up dead waters? He brought it all on himself, and if I—"

Again a sentence was left unfinished, for George Taylor was now at the point where the trail took a turn, and could see a portion of the ugly rocks below. He advanced more slowly, and with the air of one who has to force himself to look upon an ugly spectacle. There was a wild, hunted look in his eyes, and his hands were tightly clinched to check the trembling which ran over his frame like an ague attack.

But he might have spared himself much of this, after all, for when he reluctantly reached the brink, gazing fearfully downward to sum up his murderous work, there was naught unusual to be seen.

The rocks were bare. No wreck was to be seen. The stage had surely escaped being wrecked at this point at least, incredible as it seemed to that crime-stained man!

Again and again his eyes scanned the rocks below, unwilling, unable to realize the evident truth. Then a vicious curse parted his lips and an ugly glow leaped into his light eyes.

"They made the turn. They passed—yes!" as his eyes scanned the trail, noting where the whirring wheels left a blue mark on the rocks as the rear end of the coach swung around, checked within a marvelously short space, saved from toppling over to utter destruction by a miracle, barely a couple of inches from the brink.

For a brief space the dastardly schemer stood like one under a spell, his eyes wandering down the second straight stretch in the precarious trail, pausing at the next curve, even more abrupt than was the one where he now stood.

His face lightened a bit at this, and he muttered:

"They couldn't pass *that*, anyhow. Each rod sent them ahead faster, and the mules couldn't hold back *there!* It's done—done clean! It couldn't miss. It's just such an accident as might be expected any day, and so much the better now. Here—they might wonder where was the second passenger, but there—Roaring Fork tells no tales!"

He broke off with a short, ugly laugh, and took a couple of steps further along the trail, only to stop short with a startled ejaculation as his unsteadied brain recalled the driver, Jerry Drane.

Roaring Fork might tell no tales, but the driver could, unless his ugly tumble had broken his neck.

"I'm going off my nut, I reckon!" with a scowl at his own forgetfulness as he turned back to cast an eager look up the first straight extent of trail. "If that scoundrel has recovered—Ha!" his light eyes emitting a flash of fierce joy as they fell upon the still motionless figure of the luckless driver.

Apparently he had not stirred a muscle since falling before that foul stroke. His head was drooping over the brink, his foxy hair falling in tangled locks over his face, hiding his features from that fiery stare.

"His goose is cooked, I reckon," muttered Taylor as he retraced his steps, flashing suspicious glances up the side of the mountain, cut here and there by irregular clefts, down or up which a sure-footed man might readily make his way in case of need, and which afforded so many short cuts to the stage-trail from the top of the range. "But there's nothing like being doubly sure, and I'm playing for too big a stake to let even the slenderest chance slip by unimproved."

He quickly gained the side of the driver, pausing only long enough to cast another searching glance up the mountain-side, for it was barely possible that some stray prospector might be within eye-range.

Then he stooped over the body, slipping a hand beneath it until it rested over the region of the heart. Motionless for a single breath. Then his hand came away with a start, as an oath rose in his throat.

"It beats! Alive! Then—"

With that old, murderous look in his glowing eyes, George Taylor stooped again, this time to grasp the unconscious man with a vicious grip. Another instant and the body would have toppled over to be dashed to pommace on the ragged rocks below, when a sharp voice cried out:

"Hellow thar, stranger!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOVER'S LEAP.

It was a strange time and place for an avowal of love, and had Mark Mason been allowed time in which to mentally debate the matter, it may be doubted if he could have summoned up the courage to have spoken so plainly.

But he saw the slender stem of the bush yielding to the weight of Jessamine Clare, and knew that should it give entirely way, she could not support herself against the face of the cliff for even a single minute by that narrow ledge, scarce wide enough to receive the tips of her toes. By exerting his own strength he could prolong this grace, but even that could not last long, and there was such scant hope of other aid.

His retreat was cut off by the portion of the ledge yielding beneath his weight. The rocks above their heads afforded no hope. They were almost certainly doomed to fall, and that meant almost certain death.

All this lent him courage to speak, yet when the words had fairly passed his lips, the old doubts and fears returned; more than ever he felt how unutterably this woman was above him, and the thought caused his brain to whirl and his heart to sink within him.

All the more that he felt a quiver run through the lithe frame he was supporting, for that told him Jessamine heard and comprehended his mad avowal, though she made no immediate response, in words.

"You should not—I'm sorry you came—dear Mark!"

Was he dreaming? Had he already gone mad?

For one brief period the poor fellow turned sick and faint, and it was mere instinct that kept him from slipping from his precarious foothold. It sounds strained, but nevertheless the simple truth is being recorded. It was no every-day love which he felt for this woman. If it had been, doubtless he would have been bolder.

Jessamine must have felt his strong arm tremble, for she turned her face toward him, her lips quivering, a silent appeal in her lustrous eyes that ill accorded with her first words. His ghastly pale face still further terrified her, and she gasped faintly:

"Is there no hope? Must we die—so young?"

Those words were timely, and could not have been better chosen, for they brought all his manhood to the surface, and he was once more the cool, steady-nerved mountaineer.

"There's hope while life lasts, Miss Clare," he said, his tones clear and strong, though he knew how slender the comfort that worn sentence could convey. "I'll do what mortal man can, with your help."

"Tell me what to do, and I'll try," bravely choking back the fears which the sight of the yielding bush naturally inspired.

Still lending her support, Mark Mason again scanned the face of the rock wall above and beside him, vainly hunting for a method by which he might fight his way to safety with his love. All he could find was a deeper crack in the stone where he might secure a firmer grip with his left hand.

This was a few inches nearer the maiden, and he cautiously changed his grip, following the action with a gradual shifting of his foothold. At least this would enable him to support Jessamine at a less expenditure of strength, and thus postpone the inevitable.

"There is hope?" panted the maiden, feeling this change, a ray of hard-dying hope coming into her eyes as they met his. "You will save me, Mark?"

"Or die with you, Miss Clare!"

"I fear—my fingers are growing numb!"

She strove to conceal that awful dread, but it showed even more plainly in her tones than in her pale face. It nerved the young mountaineer to desperation, and almost without stopping to reason, he acted on the impulse which so suddenly took possession of him.

"Close your eyes, Jessamine, and when I say the word, let go!" he said, drawing a long breath, and nerving himself for what he felt might well prove death to them both. "Can you trust me, darling?"

"Is it—yes?" came pantingly from her lips.

Tightening his grip in the crack above his head, Mark leaned over until his arm almost encircled the maiden's waist. One second for mental prayer, then he hoarsely cried:

"Now!"

Without an instant's hesitation Jessamine unclosed her fingers, bravely smothering a faint scream as she seemed to be falling.

Mark clasped her waist with a grip born of desperation, and kept from toppling over only by that precarious grip on the sharp rock, he swung his precious burden around until his own shoulders lay flat against the face of the cliff.

The strain was frightful upon his arm, and it seemed as though it must be wrenched from its

socket; but he cared little for that, if he might only succeed in his daring purpose.

"Try to find the ledge with your feet, Jessamine," he panted, his tones hoarse and strained. "Try to steady yourself—Thank God!"

Never was there a more earnest thanksgiving!

The weight left his arm, and though he still retained his grasp, he knew that Jessamine had secured a foothold on the narrow ledge by which his own weight was supported. If she could only maintain it! If the depth below did not make her too dizzy!

"Keep your eyes shut, and only look upward if you must open them, dearest," he added, hardly conscious of his own words, his shoulder pained him so terribly. "Try not to fear. Try to think—"

"I feel safe. I knew you would not let me fall."

Simple as the words were, they lent Mark Mason the strength and steadiness he so sorely required just then. They seemed to drive away that awful dizziness which threatened him, born no doubt of the terrible strain and pain which he had to undergo.

He pressed back against the wall, then suffered his fingers to unclose, choking back the groan that tried to escape his lips as his arm swung helplessly down to his side.

Not numb, not lifeless, as would have been the case with a broken or dislocated member. That he could have borne far easier than the horrible stinging, burning, throbbing sensation which pervaded every fiber of the strained, overtired member.

"You are suffering—and all for me!" cried Jessamine, her voice indistinct and full of pain. "Oh, why did you? Why did you not let me perish alone?"

"Because I—"

Mark Mason never completed that impulsive sentence, for a fresh peril thrust itself upon his notice, and he felt that all he had done must go for naught!

A fragment of stone crumbled beneath his foot, and glancing downward he saw that the ledge was slowly giving way beneath their combined weight.

Already there was a plainly perceptible crack running close to the face of the cliff, and he knew that this, like that other portion of the ledge but a short time before, was tearing apart from the wall!

Alarmed by the ghastly pallor that came into his face, and guided by his downward glance, Jessamine forgot his warning long enough to discover the danger.

"The step is giving way! We must fail—oh, Mark!" came gaspingly from her blanched lips, and for a single breath it seemed as if she must lose her balance and thus hasten her doom.

With a warning cry Mark pressed her form back against the wall.

"Look upward, darling! For your life don't look down!"

"I will. Tell me—tell me before it falls, long enough to say one word, Mark," the maiden uttered in a barely audible tones.

Under less desperate circumstances the young mountaineer must surely have read her sweet secret, then, but with thoughts solely upon the peril which menaced the being he loved so devotedly, he was blind to all else.

He steadied his nerves, clearing his eyes, then keenly watched the slowly growing crack for a few seconds before speaking. He believed he was uttering the simple truth when he did speak:

"The ledge will hold *your* weight, Miss Clare, long enough for other aid to reach you. If I get through, which may Heaven grant for your sake! that aid shall come right speedily!"

"You mean—not *that*, Mark?" panted the maiden, agitatedly, as she cast an involuntary glance at the river which washed the base of the rock.

"It's safer to leap than to fall, and only that I feared you might think me deserting you in a cowardly hope for myself, Miss Clare, I would have been in the water before this. Now—"

"Mark!"

Only the name, but uttered in a tone that fairly thrilled his entire being as with an electrical shock. And as his eyes met hers, the simple fellow read the glorious truth at last.

Even with death staring them full in the face, Jessamine blushed divinely, though her eyes never drooped, and her voice was clear and steady as she uttered:

"Is there no hope, Mark? Must the rock go?"

"It will hold your weight, I trust, and so—good-by!"

But a little hand reached out and touched his breast. Hardly with the weight of a feather, but it seemed powerful enough to pin him back to the wall, and he could have defied the grip of a giant more easily.

"It must hold both or neither, Mark. You risked your life for mine, and now—Mark?"

"Miss—Jessamine?"

"You said—when you thought I must fall—"

"That I loved you, darling!"

"Then—I'm not sorry!" with a faint sigh as her eyes drooped and her cheeks turned still

warmer. "For I—I thought you would never—never say it, Mark!"

A swift, shy, yet loving glance brought her eyes to his, and for a single breath they seemed to forget that death stared them in the face, to remember love and love alone.

But another bit of rock crumbled from the ledge, and restored Mark Mason to something like sober reason. He spoke up quick and earnest:

"It is going, darling, and there's only one frail chance; if we fall, it is death, if we jump, there is a single chance!"

Jessamine cast a glance downward, turning pale and shivering at that awful prospect. But quickly rallying, she murmured:

"Say that you love me, just once, Mark!"

Not once, but repeatedly he gave her this assurance, his right hand slipping along the wall until his arm encircled her waist. He could do no more with such a precarious foothold, but his ardent eyes spoke volumes.

"I am ready, Mark, and far more happy than I ever dared to hope!"

"Pray for us both, Jessamine," he hoarsely muttered as his right arm grew stiffer, his muscles nerved for the terrible ordeal. "Close your eyes and trust to me."

"I will—I do, my love!" she responded, made bold by impending death. "Hold me tight, dear! It's not the fall, but separation I fear."

Another bit of rock fell away, and even if his powerful emotions would have permitted him to shape the words, Mark dared not delay another instant.

He sprung boldly from the yielding ledge, at the same time swinging the maiden around until she lay upon his breast. And as she felt the impulse, Jessamine clasped her arms about his neck, her great eyes gazing into his, a faint smile lighting up her white face.

Down, swift as thought, and yet seemingly an age of suspension in midair! Down—to strike the sullen waters clear of the rocky base, plunging deep beneath the surface, the awful shock driving the breath from their bodies, but seeming only to tighten their mutual embrace!

Down through the liquid depths until it seemed as though miles of that roaring element must be sweeping along above their devoted heads, despite the efforts which Mark Mason made to return to the surface.

These were but feeble and ill-directed, for in his generous effort to preserve his loved one as much as possible from that bitter shock, the young mountaineer had saved no care for his own well-being, and when his head did part the turbid surface, he was dizzy, sick, half-unconscious for the first few seconds.

The swift current swept him resistlessly along, but perhaps its very rapidity was all for the best, since it aided in keeping him afloat until he could catch breath and in part regain his wits.

Jessamine was hanging over his shoulder, barely conscious after that breath-taking plunge, but her eyes opened in response to his choking appeal, and she even offered to free him of her weight.

A drifting log struck his shoulder, and with a panting cry of hope he caught at the float. It was small, and water-soaked, but he knew that it would afford some support until he could gather his strength.

He aided Jessamine to reach the stick, and was thus afforded timely relief, though he still kept an arm about her waist, simply allowing his still helpless left arm to hang over the log.

Down with the current they floated, the walls growing lower and less precipitous on one hand, yet offering little hope of a safe landing, even to a strong man in full possession of his limbs and powers.

Little by little Mark was regaining his breath, his strength, and even the use of his strained left arm. Jessamine was also recovering from the shock, though still pale, weak, unnerved.

Then, as they were swept swiftly along, a sullen roaring began to force itself upon their notice, and presently a choking cry escaped the lips of the young mountaineer.

"Merciful heavens! the waterfall!"

Jessamine gave a faint cry, with something of the same horror imprinted on her pale face, though in a less degree. She had never expected a different ending, though she, like Mark, had strangely enough forgotten the very existence of that fresh peril.

Why should they have recalled it? It lay fully two miles below the point from which they were forced into taking that awful plunge. If escape was at all possible, they would reach shore long before the current could carry them half that distance; so, after all, the fact is not so strange.

And since striking the water, neither man nor maiden had been in fit condition to take thought of what lay before them, beyond their immediate vision, for had it not been for that poor drift, they would long since have sunk to death beneath the surface.

Tightening his hold upon the maiden, Mark struck out desperately for the nearest shore, trying to force the log to land before the current grew too strong for his weakened powers; but his progress was lamentably small, while the

current seemed to redouble its rapidity and force, whirling them toward the fall, where instant death awaited them both. Struggled hard and doggedly, but without avail. And then, when all seemed lost, Mark released the log, clasping Jessamine to his bosom and pressing his first kiss upon her blanched, quivering lips.

CHAPTER VIII.

GOING DOWN THE FLUME.

A SINGLE glance showed the Diamond Detective all this: the runaway mules, the empty box-seat, that gray head thrust through the window of the inner door as though its owner was trying to check the helpless team by shouting, or else trying to clamber from that death-trap, even though to make such an effort just then was little short of suicide.

The distance was so short, the team plunging along at such a frightful pace, the peril so great, that few men could have done more than simply stare in mute horror at what could not be amended; but Dandy Andy was something more than an ordinary man, and he even noted with something akin to admiration, the adroit manner in which the mules kept their footing as the cumbrous stage whirled around that sharp curve, tipping over toward the brink as its rear wheels grated along the rocky trail, casting out twin streams of sparks until checked almost on the very edge of that frightful precipice.

"Can I make it?" he mentally asked, his eyes glowing vividly, his teeth clinching until his shapely chin grew squared, more dogged.

He pressed his startled steed closer to the wall in the niche, clearing his feet from the stirrups, tightening the hat upon his head as he waited—only for a single instant of time.

No more than that, for the lead mules were already abreast of his position, too badly frightened to think of shying, even if they noticed his presence. Then—

Without giving a thought to his own peril, Dandy Andy leaped agilely from his horse, landing fairly astride the back of the off-wheeler, gripping its sides tenaciously with his muscular knees and saving himself from pitching still further by clasping both arms about its neck.

To gain this position he had to leap clear over the nearest animal, and run the risk of toppling over the precipice itself; but he dared not attempt to bestride the mule on the inner side, knowing that it would instinctively keep close to the rough, jagged wall, where his leg would almost surely be caught between its side and the rocks.

For a single breath it seemed as though his bold action must end fatally to all concerned, for the shock, or possibly the fright, made the mules swerve onward a few feet; amply enough to have insured the destruction of all but for its taking place where the trail was widened, as already described. And before they could pass by that space, Dandy Andy had secured his seat and had a tight grip on the lines.

"Steady, my beauties!" he cried, his voice ringing out clearly, with an almost reckless echo about it. "Steady—learn to peddle!"

The line tightened and the leaders, amenable to authority though so helpless to do, aught to save themselves without some such aid, swung closer still to the wall, the wheelers naturally following their example.

None too soon, for as Dandy Andy cast a fleeting glance to his right, he seemed fairly overhanging that dizzy depth!

"Brace up, major!" he cried at the top of his voice, though even then he could hardly distinguish his own words above the clatter of hoofs, the rattling of wheels, the cracking of the severely tested springs and joints of the old vehicle, mingling as they did with the sullen, unceasing roar of the waterfall far below. "Brace up! we'll git thar if the breeching don't give out!"

If there came a response, he could not hear it above the din, and for a fleeting instant he forgot even his own imminent peril.

Naturally enough he cast another glance to his right, where the waters of Roaring Fork, in high flood, were washing the base of the cliff, sending up a misty spray from the torrent which swept in a curve over the broken bed which formed a fall of some twenty feet.

But it was not the fall itself which gave him such a thrill of horror, though a single slip of his mule would almost certainly hurl him over the brink to plunge into the swirling waters far below.

Nearly in the middle of the river, and seemingly poised upon the very crest of the waterfall itself, stood two human beings, closely locked in each other's arms as though unwilling to be parted even in death.

Only the one glimpse, for then the misty spray, lifted by a gust of wind, whirled about their shapes and hiding them from his startled gaze. Only one glimpse, but that was enough to show him their pale, rigid faces turned toward him, seemingly filled with despair, even while praying for help.

"God above!" gasped the detective, himself pale as a corpse in that instant as he recognized the face and form of at least one of the imper-

iled beings. "It's Mark! Heaven help him—for mortal can't!"

Brief as was the period, it was long enough to carry him past the point where he could, with any degree of safety to himself or the helpless man imprisoned in that death-trap behind him, give even a glance toward those hapless beings who stood fairly in the jaws of death, for the second sharp curve was close at hand, and he knew that all his efforts, all his strength and nerve would be needed if that peril was successfully averted.

And so, although the waterfall was still a few rods beyond his present position, and the mist-wreaths were already lifting, Dandy Andy could not waste even a fleeting glance in that direction.

Gripping the lines, winding them tightly about his hands and bracing one foot against the pole, the other against the slackened tug, the Diamond Detective leaned back to add the weight of his body to the strength of his arms, every nerve steeled, each muscle strained to the utmost, though only gradually, steadily putting his weight to the bits of the wheelers, knowing as he did that a slip through too desperate an effort on their part to stop their breakneck pace would be fully as disastrous as too much freedom. In either case the stage must fly at a tangent over the precipice in attempting to make that turn.

Even in that moment of awful peril and suspense, Dandy Andy gave mental thanks that he had to do with mules instead of horses. Sure-footed as a cat, the animals slid and scrambled as they were forced almost upon their haunches by that iron pull, but with such seeming a marvel of chance, neither wheeler tripped or fell.

By instinct, quite as much as through the guidance of the lines, the animals closely hugged the wall, and had it not been hollowed out for that express purpose, the hubs must certainly have struck the rock, to be dashed to utter destruction.

Even as it was, Dandy Andy held his breath in grim suspense as his long-cared team swept safely past the point, expecting to feel the sudden jerk that told of the upsetting stage. But it never came!

The seeming miracle had been accomplished, thanks to that daring rider, and the worst point in all "The Flume" was passed over without an accident!

Dandy Andy uttered a cheering shout which was intended for the benefit of the old gentleman inside the stage, and settled himself for the remainder of that memorable ride. For, though the two most dangerous points were past, and all beyond was comparatively smooth sailing, it was only such in comparison with the past.

Even with those sure-footed mules to back his efforts, Dandy Andy knew that, with unlocked wheels and no break which he could possibly apply, all he could reasonably hope for was to prevent any increase of momentum. As for checking the speed of that heavy vehicle, that was entirely out of the question.

A long, narrow stretch of road lay before him, and though the distance from the road-bed to the rocks below was lessening with each rod of progress made, it was still far enough down to insure death to all who might chance to take the jump.

And though he held his mules in fairly good control, any accidental slip or tumble might end all in a twinkling.

Dandy Andy kept up that steady strain on the bits of the wheelers, and they simply slipped down that long stretch, holding back all that lay in their power, only using their hoofs for that and to keep their footing if possible. The leaders were of no service in holding back, and the Diamond Detective gave them no further care than to see that they hugged the wall closely and kept their traces jingling.

Despite all his efforts, their pace seemed to increase. The wind raised by their passage lifted the hat from his head, but it was caught under the driver's seat. His unwinking eyes filled with water, but not enough to seriously dim his vision. His arms began to cramp under the fierce strain, but he doggedly maintained his grip until the foot of the Flume was close at hand.

Then a wild, peculiar exultation took full possession of the detective, and slackening his grip he uttered a sharp cry that sent the mules bounding forward, making the huge stage swing and sway like a frail skiff in strong surf!

Down the last yards of slope and out across the brief level which lay between the Flume and the narrow bridge spanning Roaring Fork, each moment increasing their pace, with the wild rider laughing shrilly, all else forgotten for the moment in that savage thrill which such a man naturally feels when surmounting a great difficulty or gaining a victory over heavy odds.

It was very seldom that Andrew Griffin permitted himself to so completely lose his usual coolness, but in this case there was surely sufficient excuse.

He had performed a feat which, in itself, was fairly marvelous when all circumstances are taken into consideration. He had done that

which not one man in ten thousand would dare attempt, and with the odds greatly against that one ever carrying the exploit to perfect success.

Apart from this, he had been undergoing a truly terrible strain of mind even more than muscle. He had believed that only a miracle could avert a frightful death. That miracle had come to pass, and when he saw as much, as he firmly believed, he simply "let go."

Better if he had maintained his mental "grip" a little longer, as he speedily realized; but then it was too late for more than making the best of what could not be helped.

It was the sight of the bridge spanning Roaring Fork which recalled Dandy Andy to a sense of his imprudence, and with a muttered curse at his own folly, he again grasped the reins and bent his powers to checking that reckless dash.

For the moment he had forgotten the nature of the bridge and its approaches, which must be briefly described to give a fair comprehension of what follows.

After making that second curve, the road drew out of sight of the river, thanks to a sharp elbow in the bed itself. And as the base of the slope was gained, the road curved gently around for a few rods, then ran straight for the bridge.

This was formed of a single span, thanks to the narrow bed at the point in question. Great logs had been drawn across the chasm, then covered with heavy planks, a layer of clay, over which were laid cut stone. Each approach was easy, almost on a level, though the road itself grew narrower until, at the bridge, there was room only for a single team to pass at a time.

There was a simple wooden railing on either side, but frail and only for the protection of unsteady foot passengers. At each end, however, great square stones, rudely chiseled, stood as a guard, their inner corners chipped and marked by hubs, thanks to shying horses or reckless drivers.

It was this fresh peril that confronted Dandy Andy, and no mean one, since the mules were racing at full speed, seemingly far more scared than while coming down the Flume itself.

There was time only to steady the mules a bit, not to check their mad pace in any great degree, then the stage bounded over the narrow bridge, swaying and bouncing dizzily.

Then—the wheelers shied sharply, a wheel struck one of the rocks on the Tip-Top side of Roaring Fork, and with a crash and a clatter the whole outfit went down in a confused heap!

Dandy Andy shot over the head of his mount, glancing from the hips of a leader, to fall heavily on his head and shoulders.

CHAPTER IX.

JERRY DRANE IN LUCK.

So sudden and unexpected was this salutation that George Taylor sprung erect with a sharp cry of mingled terror and surprise, one hand dropping to his middle as though instinctively seeking a weapon, even before his wildly glaring eyes fell upon that tall, athletic figure just dropping into the narrow road from the broken rocks above.

"Dip lightly, stranger!" came more sharply from the new-comer, and the sunlight was reflected from the nickel trimmings of a very business-like revolver. "I've got ye kivered, an' my gun eats a hole big enough to kick a bull-pup through!"

Started though he was, and dimly feeling that his race was run, George Taylor could not help seeing how hopelessly the odds were against him, if indeed this sharp-talking, prompt-acting stranger had been an eye-witness to his recent exploits. And with only a vaguely forming resolve not to be taken prisoner alive, in case the worst was true, he mechanically flung his hands outward and upward, free of all dangerous weapons.

Just as promptly that ugly weapon was lowered, with the words:

"Ax pardon, stranger, but ye clean skeered me when ye give that yelp an' jump, like, an' me turned outside in, 'most, with the weenty glimp' I ketched o' the rattletrap—whar is she, pardner?"

Was the new-comer acting a part, or was he really so excited that his tongue had partially escaped his control?

"You saw—you know, then?" hoarsely panted Taylor, edging further away from the brink and the still motionless body of poor Jerry Drane.

"Jest a glimp', but 'nough to see that Jerry was drunk or the brake wasn't doin' its duty," briskly uttered the stranger, shivering a bit as his eyes flashed a look down the Flume, to return again to the body of the stage-driver. "Jest that, then the rocks shet off the rest. Did—she didn't take a tumble over, stranger?"

George Taylor shook his head, leaning against the wall as though his physical powers were failing him. And there was more of reality than acting in this, after all.

"I don't—I can't say. He fell off—somehow—that startled the mules. He took the lines with him, and—I tried to check the team, but—"

"Good Lawd!" spluttered the mountaineer, flashing another brief glance down the narrow

stretch, shivering as his gaze touched the sharp curve below. "Stop a snow-slide jest as easy!"

George Taylor drew a long breath and began to feel more wholly himself, for he knew that this fellow who had put in an appearance just in time to save Jerry Drane from being tossed over the precipice, knew nothing positively against him, however much he might suspect. And that his mind was not altogether at ease, his manner of half-covertly watching Taylor seemed to indicate.

"Then I was pitched off the box," he added in steadier, more connected tones. "I fell upon my head, and it knocked me senseless. I am hurt—how bad I hardly know my own self!"

He touched his head, forcing a smile as he looked at his fingers, stained with fresh blood.

"Knocked you silly, didn't it?" nodded the prospector, with another of those troubled, covert glances as he stooped over the senseless driver. "Fer—durn me ef I couldn't almost take oath that you was tryin' to heave pore Jerry, hyar, right over the side o' the Flume!"

Taylor uttered a sharp ejaculation at this, and one hand slipped inside his coat as he leaned against the wall. He forced a look of mingled horror and indignation to his face as he said:

"I was feeling—I thought he was dead! I wanted his help to look after—after what must have happened below. I never thought of harming the poor fellow; why should I?"

"That's jest what upset me, ye want to know," with more frankness in his tones as his seemingly wild suspicions faded away. "Reckon I was a fool fer thinkin' it, but—waal, the glimp' I ketched, an' the knowin' what must a' foller'd down yender—ugh!"

The strong, healthy man shivered and turned as pale as the sunburn would permit. And deep as his sympathy might be for poor Jerry Drane under other circumstances, just now Tom McCoy seemed glad of such an excuse for postponing the investigation into the fate of the stage.

George Taylor made no attempt to lend him assistance, but still supported himself against the wall like one too thoroughly shaken to be of service. But his right hand was gripping the hilt of a revolver and there was murder in his mind as he keenly watched the athletic prospector.

He had risked far too much to shrink from an additional crime, and if Jerry Drane was to recover his senses sufficiently to denounce his treacherous passenger, those words would only seal the doom of both!

Tom McCoy pulled the bruised body away from the brink, turning it over until the bloody face was uppermost. There was life lingering in the poor fellow, but he made no conscious move, though Taylor gave a start and half drew his pistol when a faint, choking moan came from those lips.

"Is he—not dead?"

"I don't reckon, stranger, but methe he's ketched his last dose. Ef he bain't—An' thar's the hearse!" with a start as though wondering at his brief forgetfulness.

"It's over—it couldn't help it!" Taylor forced himself to pronounce, his tones unsteady despite his efforts to the contrary. "But—we must find out. Will you go and—"

"I'd ruther pull a tooth, pardner," shivering. "But ef it's got to be done, why—go ahead, an' I'll come quick's I've keered fer pore Jerry fur's I kin," he added with more evenness, catching the excuse for postponing the dreaded investigation.

Taylor hesitated, but it was only for an instant. He would far rather have been the one to stop beside Jerry Drane, for obvious reasons, but he dared not press that point, lest Tom McCoy have his suspicions revived. After all, what would it matter if the driver did recover to tell the tale of his mishap?

"Let him chirp if he likes!" flashed through the brain of the bold schemer as he hastened down the Flume. "The job is done, and if they ever fall to hunting for George Taylor—may they have sore eyes until they find him!"

Left alone with the senseless driver, Tom McCoy drew the poor fellow close to the wall, hastily examining his hurts, giving a sigh of relief as he could discover no fracture of the skull, though bruises and cuts were numerous enough.

He produced a whisky flask and gently parted those swollen lips enough to permit a moderate dose to trickle its way through the teeth of his patient, then liberally bathed his face with the strong liquor.

"That'd ort to fetch ye, Jerry!" with a grim smile at the fancy. "Ef you knowed it, I do reckon you'd want to cuss 'ca'se I wasted so much more outside then I putt in'ardly. An' now—I've got to go take a look. I do reckon!"

It was really curious how reluctant this athletic fellow was to take the step which the great majority of men would feel a morbid eagerness to improve, but the fact was just as stated. Only the thought that it was a duty he owed the possible sufferers tore him from the side of Jerry Drane so soon. And even then he lingered, until the faint explosion of pistol or rifle, coming from below, forced him into action.

"Mule or man-critter?" he ejaculated, his big

eyes gaining a wild and startled stare. "Ef they did pitch over, how could eyther live this long? They jest couldn't—an' I knows it!"

Nevertheless McCoy started down the Flume, keeping close to the wall as though to delay as long as possible gazing upon the sickening scene which he felt morally sure awaited his coming.

He knew that the accident could not have culminated before the first turn, from the brief glimpse he had obtained of the stage from his position far up the range, and until he gained that point he kept to the wall and never once glanced over the brink.

He literally forced himself from the wall when that point was reached, shudderingly peering over at first, then more boldly as he failed to make the dreaded discovery.

"They jest couldn't—but be blamed ef they didn't, now!" he spluttered, failing to make that discovery, and catching sight of the bluish sign at his feet, showing that the stage had really passed the curve in safety.

Somehow the fact lent him fresh courage, though he was still unable to believe an unguided team could possibly traverse the Flume without plunging to utter destruction, and he increased his pace until the second elbow was gained. Once more he shudderingly peered over the dizzy height, only to be unrewarded, as before.

"The river's tuck 'em, hide an' taller!" he muttered, noting how fiercely the foamy water swirled and tumbled and tossed below the fall, washing the base of the mountain in a dizzy whirlpool. "But whar's that stranger? An' who done that shootin'?"

He stood in doubt for a brief space, once glancing back toward the spot where he had left Jerry Drane, as though wondering whether it would not be best to return and complete his restoration. But then he doggedly continued his descent, muttering:

"That skeery critter come this way, an' I'll ketch him up at the bottom, I reckon. Mebbe we'll hev to tote Jerry to town, an' one man cain't do that much ef he is a hummer on ten wheels!"

But Tom McCoy made another discovery which sent him running at top speed down the remainder of the slope, across the level, over the bridge and alongside the wrecked stage, that sight completely driving from his mind all thoughts of George Taylor.

The stage was a complete wreck, lying on its shattered roof, having crushed beneath its weight the very wheeler on which Dandy Andy had made the descent of the Flume. But McCoy gave this only a fleeting glance as he caught sight of human forms further down the slope.

"Good Lawd! You never come down the Flume in that hearse! Don't ye say it, fer I won't swaller the lie ef ye do!" he spluttered, staring in amazement at Dandy Andy, who was bending over the figure of an elderly gentleman, chafing his temples with liquor from a pocket-flask.

That awkward toss as the stage went to wreck and ruin, had briefly deprived the Diamond Detective of his senses, though it must have been far more serious only for his striking his head mule in the fall.

The instant his breath was restored, Dandy Andy picked himself up and without wasting time in looking for his own injuries, he hastened to the overturned stage in quest of the solitary passenger.

The door on that side was partly open, though jammed tight by the broken frame, and he could thrust his head into the opening. A hollow groan came to his ear, and he caught sight of a bare, white head, its owner lying in a painfully doubled-up condition under the seats.

A very short time sufficed to extricate Major Wilcox from that trap, and placing him on the nearest bit of clear ground, Dandy Andy set about restoring his consciousness, heaving a grateful sigh as he failed to discover any broken bones or serious injury, though there was an ugly-looking wound which laid a portion of the old man's skull bare.

"Where'd you come from?" he sharply demanded, glancing up from his labors. "Not down the Flume, yourself?"

"Waal, now, I jest did; but ef you—"

"Did you see the waterfall as you came along?"

Tom McCoy nodded assent, too much bewildered to do more just then.

"Did you see anything else? Did you see a man and a woman standing in the middle of the river? Quick, confound you!"

"Didn't see no sech—how could I?" stammered the athletic prospector, falling back a pace before those glowing eyes, believing he had encountered a madman, at the very least.

"God receive their souls!" half-groaned the detective.

drooped and his stern face blanched, but he rallied as quickly, forcing a smile as he looked into the startled face of the tall prospector.

"Maybe it was a forked tree, after all. I didn't have much time for outside watching, as you can imagine, sir."

"But—ef I didn't know that was Jerry's hearse—an' you didn't fly the track an' jest nat'ally jump clean across the drink?"

Despite his double anxiety, Dandy Andy could not keep from laughing at this question, put in all seriousness, despite its ludicrous nature.

"It wasn't quite that bad, though I'll never write out a description of our trip. We came down—and that's all I really remember."

"An' thar's the other critters, head up an'—Waal, that gits me! Gits me all over! Come down—An' me a-listenin' to him tellin' of it like—Stranger!"

"What is it now?"

"You didn't hear no wings a-flappin' over the box, did ye?"

"If I did, I hadn't time to look around, be sure!"

"Look around? But—You was inside the hearse?"

"I was riding that poor devil of a wheel mule," with a fleeting glance toward the mangled creature, then adding, sharply: "Drop talk and lend a hand, can't you, man? Help me carry the gentleman up to a level. He's coming to, and it's better have him where his first glance won't fall on that wreck."

Like one moving and acting in a dream, Tom McCoy complied, aiding Dandy Andy to bear Major Wilcox up the slope and along to the shade of a tree not far distant from the wrecked stage.

As they gently placed him on the ground, the old gentleman opened his eyes, staring about with a dazed air, muttering incoherently.

"You're all right now, major," briskly cried the detective, bending over the sufferer and thus touching his lips unseen by the prospector, as a sign of caution. "Don't you know me? I'm Griffin."

"I know—I remember, now!" faintly uttered Wilcox, his head sinking back and his eyes closing as a shudder ran over his frame.

"Better so—take it easy for a bit," cheerily added Griffin. "You're all right. Only shaken up a little. Don't try to talk until your brain is clearer, dear sir. It's best that way."

With another meaning touch the detective drew back, turning toward the still marveling prospector.

"You say you came down the Flume? Didn't you see anything of the stage-driver? He let the team get away from him somehow. Perhaps he let them slip him when he stooped to look, at the top of the Flume."

"Then you didn't see him pitch off the box?"

"I only saw a runaway team, and I jumped on the wheeler as it came past the first chamber. I rode down here, coming to grief by striking a hub, as you see," rapidly explained Griffin, seeing that this was the shortest method of clearing that sorely befogged brain. "Yonder is my horse. He followed us down. Now what can you tell me about the driver? Out with it, man!"

"He's up yender, dead or livin', but ef—"

Tom McCoy was cut short by a hoarse shout coming from the last stretch of the Flume, and glancing in that direction both men beheld a human figure wildly swinging its arms for a moment before hurrying painfully out of sight down the curve.

"Ef it ain't him, I'm a liar!" ejaculated McCoy, hurrying away at the top of his speed, eager to be the first to greet Jerry Drane and tell him how marvelously three-fourths of his team had been saved.

Dandy Andy turned toward Major Wilcox, who was now sitting up at the foot of the tree, looking much better, though still ghastly and plainly suffering from his wounds.

"I'll explain everything when we are safe at my hotel, major," he hastily uttered. "Don't talk too much, for there's mischief in the air, and I can't be sure which are friends and who are our enemies!"

"I waited as long—"

"I only got your letter this afternoon, major, and was in the saddle at once, hoping to cut you off in time. I'd give a month's pay if you were sound enough to turn back to Summit at once!"

"I cannot—my head feels fit to split!" groaned the old man, clasping his temples with trembling hands.

"I know. It's an ugly cut, but the skull is sound beneath it," was the grave response. "A good night's rest will make you as sound as ever, I'm hoping. And, maybe, your coming won't complicate matters much."

"I had to come!" testily. "I dared not write in full, for fear of the letter miscarrying, and when I knew you were following up the wrong clew, what could I do?"

The sound of eager voices drew near, and with a hasty caution not to dwell upon the subject for the present, Griffin turned to meet Tom McCoy and Jerry Drane.

The latter looked much the worse for wear, limping badly, though no bones had given way as the stage had run over his foot. His face was

but a mask of blood and dust, and his poor nose looked more like a ripe tomato than its usual self.

"How came you to let them get away from you?" sharply demanded Griffin, only to be bluntly cut short by the driver.

"Let 'em—be durned! That dirty cuss hit me a clip that tumbled me twenty ways fer Sunday!" and he wound up with a torrent of fiery imprecations on the head of George Taylor.

"An' to think o' me 'most slohberin' over the pesky critter thar on the Flume!" snorted McCoy, in utter self-contempt. "An' when I fu'st sighted the imp he was gittin' ready fer to dump Jerry over the rock! Ef I only knew how I could kick myself the hardest way, now!"

Andrew Griffin was grave, his handsome face wearing a troubled look as his eyes passed from one speaker to the other. Had the danger he feared from the first moment in which his eyes rested on that delayed letter, made itself felt so soon? Was this part of the plot against his employer, or were these men wildly exaggerating in their natural excitement?

Nor was this the worst, since Marion Wilcox had escaped with life and limb. There was the almost certain death of Mark Mason, of whose despairing face he had caught such a fleeting glimpse. With his disappearance from the stage of life would vanish one half the clew which had led the Diamond Detective to Tip-Top.

He decided not to question either of the two men further, just then, knowing right well that the whole truth must come out in the end. He only paused to mutter another word of caution to Major Wilcox, then strode swiftly away with out giving any explanation of his actions.

"I couldn't make him understand without stirring him up too deeply. Time enough when it's got to come out in full!" he mentally decided as he picked his way toward the river bluff, from whence he knew he could obtain an unobstructed view of the waterfall.

A few rods comprised the length of his journey, and then, his face white and stern set, he stood with tightly-folded arms gazing down and outward, his eyes fixed on the point where they had caught that thrilling glimpse of the devoted lovers.

"Right there they stood!" he muttered, his tones husky and filled with strong emotion. "The rock is covered, since the rise, but the poor fellow found a footing there for a time. It couldn't have lasted long, though, and perhaps it is just as well so. Even if he had held out, no mortal aid could have rescued them!"

His gaze passed on with the swift current, sweeping down that fiercely beautiful curve, to join the tossing, foamy waves and boils and suck-holes that constantly clanged shape, never twice alike but always terrible in their deadly power. The strongest swimmer would have been helpless as a decayed log when once fairly in their grip. A log itself would soon have been pounded into a mass of splinters on those sunken rocks amidst the whirls.

"It was quickly over, poor souls!" he murmured as he turned away from that terribly fascinating scene. "I'm glad they had time while on that rock to breathe a prayer to heaven!"

Strong as were his nerves, Andrew Griffin felt forced to pause under cover for a few moments before he could drive that look of horror and grief from his face and eyes. But when he did reappear, no one could have guessed how troubled he was at heart.

He found Tom McCoy and Jerry Drane fumbling over the shattered stage, though that was hopelessly past repair, but he did not care to enter into conversation with them, further than to say:

"I'll take the gentleman on to town, and tell the people what a fix you're in. No doubt you'll have all the help you require, shortly."

"Tell 'em to come heeled, stranger!" cried McCoy, with a warlike air. "Thar's that durned whelp who chugged Jerry an' fetched all this misery down in a heap! He's got to answer fer it, but it's ketchin' 'fore hangin'—wuss luck!"

"I'll tell them. And, mark you, pardner, I'll give fifty dollars out of my own pocket for just five minutes talk with the fellow, if you can take him alive! I owe him that much for the fun I had coming down the Flume, you understand!" passing on with a short, hard laugh.

A sharp whistle brought his horse cantering to his side, and with him at his heels the detective quickly rejoined Major Wilcox.

"You're looking better, good luck!" he cried, cheerily. "You'll be fine as a fiddle in the morning, major! Of course you can ride!"

"I can try," a little curtly.

"It's only a couple of miles to Tip-Top, and my nag is like a cradle for smooth motion," laughed Griffin, lending the old gentleman a hand and keenly, though covertly, watching his movements.

These were slow and stiff, but the detective drew a long breath of relief at the result of his experiment. He had expected much less freedom of action, and when he saw that the major gave no signs of dizziness in rising erect, his fears for that ugly gash on his head lessened.

With the aid of that friendly arm Major Wilcox settled himself in the saddle, and despite his

CHAPTER X.

MORE THAN HIS HANDS FULL.

BARELY above his breath Andrew Griffin murmured this brief prayer for those whom he felt assured must have gone down to their death in the raging flood. For a moment his eyes

sore bruises, he at once showed the old training of the cavalryman.

Without stopping to hear the words which Tom McCoy shouted after him, Andrew Griffin led the good horse along the trail to Tip-Top, only too glad to have time for reflection.

He had ample food for thought just now!

Few though his questions had been, he had learned enough to feel tolerably sure that there had been more of design than of accident in that runaway down the Flume. It was possible, of course, that Jerry Drane had become involved in a quarrel with the passenger who occupied the seat with him, though only a madman would have thought of fighting under such circumstances!

Then—and he could not keep his thoughts away from that terribly sad point—there was the memory of Mark Mason and his companion in peril. Who was she? Not Annie, his sister, thank Heaven!

"Thank Heaven for so much mercy!" he inwardly breathed as he recalled her fair face seen as he galloped past the little bakery while hastening in the vain hope of preventing Major Wilcox from entering Tip-Top.

And now he was forced to guide that very individual into what he feared would prove a hotbed of plots and perils!

Truly, he found his hands more than full, as will be shown in due course of time.

The old soldier bore the trip better than might have been expected, considering how thoroughly he had been shaken up, and his aches were not too severe for busy thought, as was proved by the ejaculation:

"Really, Griffin, I never met with a more curious accident!"

Dandy Andy flashed a quick glance upward into the face of his employer hesitating a little before replying:

"Accident, major? Well, I'd call it an attempt at murder!"

CHAPTER XI.

FROM OUT THE JAWS OF DEATH.

JUST while fighting for the life of his dear one, in the vain hope of gaining land before the increasing current should sweep them over the fall to annihilation amidst the terrible swirls below, Mark Mason felt an under-current resistlessly pulling him back nearer the center of the river.

The nearly-submerged log beside which they had drifted so far, whirled around as though eager to take the final plunge, and with a choking cry of strangely mingling emotions, Mark caught Jessamine in his arms, holding her head above the surface, yet resigning himself to the current.

Even then he took care to turn her face from the clouds of misty spray rising on the air. As though aught could add to her fear of death.

Not a word was spoken by either. There was no time, no need for such an idle waste of breath. The current was doing its work so swiftly. A score of seconds would end all.

And yet, even while that grim calculation was flashing through his brain, Mark Mason saw and caught at the ghost of a hope.

A bit of driftwood—it may even have been the rotten log by aid of which they had come so far—paused for a second while apparently on the point of pitching down that dizzy curve. Paused, then pitched half out of the water, turning over, end for end, to vanish amidst the spray.

An inarticulate cry escaped his lips, and with a desperate effort, the young mountaineer flung himself to one side, turning on his back, sending his feet at a sharp angle down into the water. Then—

White, breathless, victor in that brief yet killing fight, Mark rose erect on the flat rock, clasping the maiden in his arms.

Not until it was almost too late had he remembered that one frail hope, for the rising waters had covered the rock from sight, and only for that bit of drift striking against the barely submerged obstacle, he would have gone over the fall without further struggle.

Even yet Jessamine did not fully comprehend, clinging to her lover convulsively, her eyes closed, her every expectation that of being dashed to death in the whirlpool below the fall.

"Safe—safe, my own!" panted Mark, though it required all his powers to keep a footing on that slippery rock, hampered as he was by the weight of the young woman.

Her eyes opened, she gazed into his face. He forced a smile as he carefully lowered her until her feet touched the hidden rock, saying:

"Try to find a hold for your feet, Jessy, but don't trust your weight on them until you feel quite sure that—"

"I am—one foot is in a hole, and I can stand alone—see!" she cried, with a piteous assumption of brave gayety, removing her arms from about his neck.

Mark forced a smile, but he did not tell her that the respite had not come a moment too soon. His right foot was slowly slipping back along the slimy rock, but then it stopped, wedging under a projecting layer. Not until then did he draw anything like a free breath.

"Is there—will aid ever come, Mark?"

"Pray for it, my love," he huskily said, drawing her white face down against his bosom, holding the poor child thus, quite as much to conceal his own agony as for the comfort he hoped thus to convey.

Aid? How could it come? Even though the rocky shores on either side were crowded with spectators, all eager to lend that aid, of what avail?

Though Roaring Fork was narrow enough at this point—fifty yards, at the outside, from bluff to bluff, and the flood itself was lessened a few feet in width by the shelving rocks that lay along the base of each hill—it might as well have been in mid ocean for all the assistance which could possibly come from land. The rock on which the lovers stood was nearly in the center of the river, and not a dozen feet above where the flood began to curve as it leaped down to the whirlpool below.

No boat could possibly gain that rock, by oars or paddle, and if an attempt was made to send it down by a line from shore or the bridge itself, what mortal power could drag it safely back again?"

There was no hope—save in a pitying Providence!

Though he meant his brief answer to convey hope, it told Jessamine all, clearly as though he had shaped his thoughts in plain words. She shuddered convulsively, her face hidden in his bosom, for life was very dear—sweeter than ever since the young mountaineer had spoken his love. But then her native courage asserted itself, and lifting her face until their eyes met, she said:

"I understand, dear. It must be death!"

His sole answer was a kiss, which Jessamine returned without a blush. They stood in the presence of death. Why should she try to disguise the truth, of which she was proud?

"When it must come, tell me, Mark. Then—kiss me—hold me close—they will know, when they find us, then!"

Though such was certainly not her intention, she was making death ten-thousand-fold more bitter for Mark, by showing him how entirely she loved him. Ah, if he had been bolder, if he had only dared to win such words but even a day earlier!

Thus they were standing when the stage came whirling down the Flume, and though the rattle and clatter was drowned by the roaring of the fall and the whirlpool, it chanced that both Mark and Jessamine caught a glimpse of the runaway. Only that, for then the spray came curling about them to blot out the vision.

"They will know—they will find us—somewhere!"

The poor girl seemed to take a curious degree of consolation in this thought; that at last their pure and perfect love would be guessed if not known for certain. She never thought how frail is even the closest human embrace when contrasted with such a hell of tumbling waters and foam-mashed rocks. She thought—if thinking it could be called at all—that they would be drawn ashore, far below, clasped in each other's arms, dead yet joined even then.

It had been but a comparatively brief period of time since they gained a footing on the rock in mid-river, but even before the stage flashed across their vision, Mark Mason noted how rapidly the water was rising. Already it came half-way to his knees, and a very few more inches would decide their fate. Even for her precious life he could not hope to withstand that horrid strain much longer.

But the end came even more quickly than even he had calculated.

Jessamine uttered a sharp cry, freeing one hand to point up the stream to where a great tree was floating down with the swift current.

Though long since dead, as its barkless trunk and broken limbs bore mute evidence, there were enough of the latter remaining on the top to act as a drag, or a sort of rudder, as it may be called. Thanks to this, the drift was coming butt first, and swung by the current, so near the center of the stream that it must surely sweep the lovers from their footing on the submerged rock as the tree plunged over the fall.

With a frightful sort of fascination both watched the tree as it came closer, the butt now pointed almost direct for their refuge.

With a calmness born of despair, Mark made himself heard above the roar of waters:

"Hold tight, darling! It can be no worse than death! I'll try to jump on the tree—"

He had time for no more, for the drift was fairly upon them, the butt shooting straight as fate for the spot where they stood, as though bent on destroying even this frail chance for life, since even so desperate a man could not hope to secure a footing on that smooth trunk while so burdened, and with it in swift motion.

Nearer and swifter came the huge tree, and just as Mark lifted Jessamine clear of the waters, meaning to leap aside with his precious burden rather than be caught so frightfully, the drift came to a sudden halt, the abrupt check cutting off the water so that the flat rock was left bare for a few seconds.

The butt had swept against the rock so squarely that its great impulse was checked, the tree remaining stationary for a single breath before

its many-boughed top began swinging around with the current.

Mark did not pause to note all this, as a matter of course, but he realized enough of the truth to alter his mad purpose of leaping into the water on one side, springing upon the bare trunk instead, making all haste toward the first branches, knowing that each step might end in a fatal slip.

The hand of an overruling Providence was in it all, for no purely mortal skill could have carried him through to safety, since he could not even see where he was planting each foot in turn. His precious burden shut off that view, and he could only keep his eyes fixed on the broken limbs nearest to the roots. Yet he leaped along that long trunk in his wet and slippery boots without slip or trip—a feat which he would not have dared attempt with less at stake, even with a stationary log over still and shallow water.

He gained the limb and steadied himself by a stout fork with one hand, still holding Jessamine across his breast. For a single instant he grew dizzy, and the world seemed turning the wrong way.

The butt of the tree still held fast against the rock, partly wedged under the top layer. The top was swinging around in the current, and increasing its speed with each second of time, as a matter of course, since the flood was gaining a greater purchase against it.

Mark uttered a hoarse cry, through which struggled a wild but actual hope, as he resumed his perilous advance, fairly trembling with eagerness as he saw the tree-top nearing shore. Would it—it was!

Plenty long enough to span the gap, as he now saw, but would it be strong enough to resist the flood? Would not its dead top snap and grind off against the rocks too rapidly for him to save his love?

Natural enough the dread, but instead of unmanning the young mountaineer, it seemed to lend him strength and sureness of foot.

Holding Jessamine with one arm, he caught at each limb to steady himself on that moving, shivering bridge which lay between life and death, expecting with each moment to feel the shock which must come when the first limbs touched shore or dragged on bottom.

Thank Heaven! the water was deep along shore!

The shock came, just as he reached a stout limb, and clinging to this he withstood it, watching the dry top crashing and splintering—would it never stop? Must he lose all, even yet?

The shock caused Jessamine to open her eyes, and she seemed to divine the truth of their situation as by instinct. The tree slackened its drift—slower—then, when lying nearly at right angles with the current, it stopped short!

"Still—lie still, Jessy!" panted Mark as the girl moved quickly in his tiring arm. "A moment lost—"

"It is safer so!" she cried, steadying herself upon the shivering bridge. "Follow—I am sure of foot, and—"

There was no time to say more. The tree turned slightly, as if about to tear from its frail moorings, and Jessamine sprung along to the next limb, catching it even as she glanced back to note the progress of her lover.

He swiftly followed, ready to catch her should she slip or falter, and seeing this, the brave girl hurried on, making her way through the branches, now so thick as to prove a serious obstruction. And when only a few feet from shore, the barrier seemed impassable!

Until, with a bound, Mark reached it, and tore off a splintered limb, drawing aside another. Jessamine stooped under this, and was in safety!

Mark bent low to follow, though the swinging limb bothered him the more as he was forced to release it. Yet he would have been safe, only for that treacherous shot which rung out, seemingly directly above their heads. And at the sound he reeled back with a sharp cry, falling among the broken limbs, just as the tree gave another ominous lurch!

CHAPTER XII.

HOPES AND FEARS.

THE glad cry that parted the maiden's lips as her feet struck the firm rocks in safety, was cut short by an anguished groan as she beheld her lover reel and fall like one death-stricken.

For a single breath she stood helpless, and not until Mark lay on the mass of broken, splintered limbs, with the tree groaning and quivering as if on the point of being swept away by the furious flood, could she break that hideous spell. Then, thinking only of saving his body if not his life, Jessamine sprung from the rocks into the tree-tops and gained his side.

Before she could throw her arms about him, Mark partially rallied and strove to regain his footing. It was her small but strong hand that enabled him to accomplish this. It was her arm that supported the dazed man until he could clear his brain sufficiently to aid himself. And it was her loved voice that did more than all else to counteract the effects of that dastardly shot from ambush.

Jessamine never knew what words she uttered. Indeed, that portion of the adventure was as a dim yet hideous nightmare to her ever afterward.

The tree quivered and bent before the force of the current. The water spouted up around their feet, threatening to destroy their last hope. A great limb snapped short off with a report that rose clear above the roar of the waters, and the tree moved several feet down the stream.

Mark must have divined what was coming, despite his dazed brain, for with a hoarse cry he caught Jessamine up in his arms and blindly plunging forward, succeeded in reaching shore!

None too soon. Even as his feet left the splintered mass, the waters prevailed, and with a grating sound the providential bridge was a bridge no more!

The butt was uplifted, tearing off a portion of the strong ledge of rock under which it had become jammed, sweeping over the flat top, to plunge into the whirlpool at the foot of the fall.

Neither Mark nor Jessamine saw this, however. They sunk at the base of the cliff, overcome by all they had undergone, lying as though dead, without breath or motion.

If the cowardly assassin had dared follow his bullet, then, he would have found an easy prey.

Jessamine was the first to recover, and her first thought was of her lover, a gasping moan escaping her lips as she saw the fresh blood that marked his ghastly pale face. She flung herself upon his corpse, as she felt it surely was, but with the first touch of her lips, Mark opened his eyes with a low, glad sigh.

A few minutes later the lovers were seated together in a sheltered nook close to the base of the cliff, which, indeed, at that point even formed a slanting roof above their heads.

That treacherous shot had barely broken the skin above one temple and partially stunned Mark for a few moments, but apart from the free flow of blood, which was really a benefit to him after all he had undergone, there was little to show for the wound.

His strained left arm gave him far more trouble, and he felt sore and weakened throughout, while Jessamine, too, plainly showed the effects of the trials she had been called on to undergo.

And yet, two happier people the warm sun of Colorado never shone upon!

"To think that, after my doubts and fears—to know that you really love me, darling!" muttered Mark, pressing her hands between his, an ardent, yet wistful glow in his eyes.

"To think—after all my fears—I had to—" began Jessamine, flushing divinely yet with a merry sparkle in her eyes as they met his gaze, only to droop beneath it.

"Say it, darling," softly whispered Mark.

"Had to almost ask—I can't, Mark!"

"Only after I had spoken, little girl," laughed Mark, divining what her first impulse had been, though it yielded to maidenly shame.

"When you felt that I'd never have a chance to rivet the chains, though!" with a soft laugh as she nestled closer to his side, her still damp head touching his breast, her eyes turned toward the rising spray though the fall itself was hidden from sight. "And yet—you will not think me too bold, Mark?"

His answer came in actions, not in words, but it must have proved entirely satisfactory, since Jessamine added, her tones gravely sweet:

"Yet I never felt one-half so happy, so blessed, so utterly content to accept what God held in store, Mark. It sounds so strange, put in cold words, but it is true. I no longer feared death. All I longed for was to hear you say those words again. All I feared was being parted from you."

There was silence between them for several minutes after that.

Mark could feel just what Jessamine meant to convey, but, man-like, his tongue was far too clumsy to express what he felt in turn. After all, it did not matter much. His close, protecting embrace was eloquence enough, and Jessamine knew all that was passing through his mind.

Presently they began to talk more prosaically, though as a matter of course they seldom wandered far from that one subject. By mutual consent they avoided their narrow escape from the rock at the edge of the fall, and of the strange attempt at murder which followed. Mark declared that it must have been an accidental shot, fired at some other object, and Jessamine was only too glad to accept that explanation.

Sweet as he found that interview, Mark was considerate enough to express a dread lest Jessamine suffer from sitting still in her wet garments, but she resisted his offer to leave their retreat.

"The sun is so warm, and the water not cold," she declared, hesitating a little before bringing herself to give her actual reasons.

She dreaded the risk of being seen to enter town in wet garments, which so plainly betrayed an accident. Not only would the news spread wide and fast, thus giving rise to awkward questions and gossip, but it would certainly come to the ears of her father.

"And he—though your father, dearest, I must

say it," uttered Mark, gravely, a shade creeping over his handsome face. "He is so proud and stern and haughty with all whom he deems his inferiors! He would almost look upon it as an insult if he knew I had saved—if he knew I had shared your adventure, Jessy!"

"He loves me so passionately. I am his only child, you know, dear," was the apologetic response.

"And yet—what will it be when I tell him all, little one?"

Jessamine made no immediate reply. She gazed out upon the spray, now showing all the colors of the rainbow as it caught the last rays of the sun over the Western range.

"As I must tell him, Jessy," pursued Mark, gravely but softly, his pale cheek resting lightly upon her damp hair. "After the words that have passed between us, I can't keep silence. I know he will be angry at my presuming so far, but—"

"Mark!" half indignantly exclaimed Jessamine. "Presumptuous—you? I will not listen to such language, sir!"

"Yet it is true, Jessy," even more gravely than before. "You are rich, lovely, all that is to be worshiped and esteemed. I—what am I, in comparison?"

"You are my hero—my love!" the maiden murmured, lifting her warm red lips to his in a passionate kiss.

But even that bribe could not move Mark Mason from the task he had set himself, and after a brief space he added:

"It is not that I am a poor man. That is not such a mighty barrier in America, thank Heaven! It is rather this: I am the son of my father! And he—you have heard of him, Jessy?"

Her eyes drooped and her cheeks lost a portion of their color. She had heard of Bill Mason, the ne'er-do-well, and though he was the father of her lover, of the sister whom she also loved, she could not say she had ever heard aught to his credit.

"I see you have heard about him, Jessy, and I need not tell you more. But—so has your father heard of him! And when my father's son asks his daughter's hand in marriage, what will he say?"

"Nothing that can alter my estimate of the man who offered his life that I might have a few minutes longer to live, Mark!" was the earnest response, her eyes meeting his gaze without flinching, all her great love visible in her beautiful face as she added: "He may keep us asunder, Mark, for a time: he may even forbid my seeing you; but though he is my father, he cannot prevent my loving you through all my life!"

"But he can hinder me from winning you, Jessy," with a faint sigh, then shaking his hair back with renewed resolution as he added: "But he shall never charge me justly with underhand actions, little one. I will see him this very evening, and tell him how I love you. I will ask him to grant me his richest treasure, not because I am deserving of it, but because I love her so dearly—because she loves me!"

"Mark?" hesitated the maiden, her eyes drooping anew.

"Well, little woman?"

"Not to-night, please! Not before to-morrow night. Let me—if I can bring him to an extra good humor with me, perhaps—"

Mark caught her meaning readily enough, despite her stammering speech, and though he felt sure even her witching arts could avail but little in his favor when Jasper Clare came to understand what he dared hope for, he could not find the heart to say as much, or to refuse her.

Yet he was willing enough to drop that branch of the subject. It was so recently that he had won her confession of love, that he could well afford to be content with so much for a few hours.

Then, as they waited for the friendly shadows of twilight, Jessamine for the first time alluded to the prime cause of all their perils, telling of the mountain tramp, whose brutal conduct had ended in that nearly fatal runaway.

She told her story while nestling close to the side of her lover, resting her head upon his breast, listening to the quick, full throbings of his heart. Thus it came about that she never knew how white and hard his face grew, nor how stern despair crept into his eyes.

For, as Jessamine half humorously described the tramp, an awful dread came into his heart; the fear that the rascal would prove to be none other than his graceless father of whom nothing had been seen or heard so long!

He tried to hope that all would turn out differently, and managed to so school both his face and voice that Jessamine might not discover his fears. And though there was a curious restraint visible in all he did or said after that, the maiden was too thoroughly happy to really notice it, though she did venture on shyly rallying him once.

"You are so grave, and sober, Mark! Is it—you have begun to repent, so soon?"

His response satisfied the happy girl, and they resumed their way toward Tip-Top.

It had been agreed that neither was to allude to their adventure if so doing could possibly be avoided, at least until after Jessamine found a favorable chance to break the tidings to her father. Though, if they had been seen and recognized by the driver or the passengers on the stage, of course the whole truth would have to come out.

Thanks to the twilight and their own precautions, the lovers gained the Clark residence without being seen, or at least noticed, and Mark left Jessamine after one lingering caress, hastening toward his own humble home, back of the little bakery.

As he gained the threshold he caught the sound of a harsh, strange voice in the "living-room," and he sprung forward, his face paling as he recognized his long-absent father, who hiccuped:

"Hellow, sonny, jes' in time! Gi' me snort o' p'izen ef ye don't want to see the pore ole man kerlapse a flue!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A BULLET WINGED BY JEALOUSY.

GEORGE TAYLOR, with a touch of the same wonder in his busy brain that shortly afterward thrilled Tom McCoy to his very center, saw that his intended victims had escaped pitching over the edge of the Flume while making the first sharp curve. A single glance at the rocky trail told him so much, and he therefore did not waste so much as a glance over the rocks before hastening on, eager to place a substantial barrier between the ugly revolver of the athletic prospector and his own precious person.

"He swallowed it like a lamb, but one word from Jerry Drane might only too easily put—Mother of Moses! what's that?"

"For the instant all his own evil schemes were forgotten as he stared out and down upon the river, where such a thrilling drama was being enacted.

He saw the lovers standing seemingly upon the very crest of the flood where it began to plunge downward to join in the mad dance of the yeasty waters forming the whirlpool.

He saw the huge dead tree swooping swiftly toward them, and a gasping breath escaped his lips as it struck against the submerged rock.

He beheld the lithe, active young mountaineer leap upon the bare trunk with the woman clasped in his arms, and desperately fight for her life against such terrible odds.

And as he took all this in, something between a curse and a groan came hotly from his throat, for he recognized both man and woman!

"She here? And that fawning hound! What can it all mean?"

Taylor rallied swiftly, running down the slope at full speed as he watched the tree swinging around to form that miraculous bridge from death to life, drawing a pistol as he kept his glowing eyes fixed on the figure of Mark Mason.

And his was the hand that winged the lead, just when the young mountaineer was on the point of following his loved one to land; his the viciously triumphing cry that rung out as that human target reeled and staggered back, to drop upon the splintered limbs like one dead, while the surging flood tore and tugged and pushed against the slowly yielding bridge.

"Two birds in one day!" accompanied that savage burst of triumph. "One more, and I'll be—"

A mouthful of savage oaths took the place of that sentence, for he saw Jessamine Clare spring back to the side of her lover, seemingly resolved to share his doom if she could not avert it.

For a single breath his deadly weapon covered them, but he dared not fire. At first the maiden's form shielded that of her lover, and though this was only momentary, it was long enough to clear that evil brain, long enough to warn him of his own perilous position.

"Only for those two imps up yonder!" with a scowl toward the head of the Flume.

Only for his natural dread of the coming of Tom McCoy and Jerry Drane, he would have made his work doubly sure in this quarter; but the risk was too great.

"That long-geared tramp must have heard me shoot, and even if the driver hasn't come to, he'll be down here like a hungry bound on the trail of a bone!" the villain muttered, with a last vicious glance toward the lovers, now in the act of reaching the rocks.

He crossed the roadway at a bound, scrambling swiftly into one of those narrow cuts which, as already stated, marked the side of the mountain in a number of places, affording a short cut to the Flume from the top of the range.

This particular defile took a sharp turn only a few yards from the road, and the moment this point was passed, George Taylor was completely shielded against discovery from any one descending the flume.

As a backward glance assured him of this fact, he drew a long breath and instinctively threw out the exploded cartridge from his pistol, replacing it with another. He fancied he could catch the rapid falling of human steps on

the rocky trail, and a grim smile curled his lips as he muttered barely above his breath:

"How easy to play Leonidas, if I cared to hold the pass! But why should I? Go feast your eyes on the fragments, Tom McCoy, then see how nearly you and Jerry Drane can hit on a description of the hero whose finger stirred up the pudding! And may you never sleep easy until you find the fellow who looks that way!"

With a sound midway between a laugh and a growl, the desperado pursued his course, using such baste as might be along that narrow, crev-ice-like pass. Once or twice he sunk low and almost dragged along on his belly, where the nature of the ground laid him open to view of any one gazing that way from the stage trail, taking these precautions even though his own keen vision failed to detect aught of such look-outs.

Rash, impulsive though his conduct had been that day, every step had been carefully planned in advance, every movement discounted, up to his wholly unexpected discovery of Mark Mason and Jessamine Clare in such extraordinary peril.

And even that thrilling spectacle had thrown him off his balance only for a brief space, though it filled his heart with vicious hatred and jealous fears.

"I hit him, but how hard? Is he still alive? Is she—Satan burn the beggarly whelp! how did he catch on to such a chance as that?"

Up to this moment, when he had almost gained the crest of the rocky range, pausing for breath now that he felt fully guarded against discovery by any one on or near the Flume, Taylor had hardly given the stage and its solitary inmate a passing thought, partly because he never for an instant dreamed that escape from total destruction was possible, but mainly through that strange rescue which he had witnessed.

He cast a scowling glance back in the direction of the river, one hand mechanically fumbling with the butt of his pistol.

"I was a fool for not risking another shot! What if she had looked up? What would she have seen? Not my face, but the mask of a perfect stranger! More fool I for not remembering so much at the right time!"

Despite his intense chagrin, the villain broke into a short, harsh laugh at his own folly in bemoaning what was past beyond recall.

"Better luck next time!" as he resumed his rapid progress through the thick-lying rocks. "And it may not be so bad, after all. I don't often miss a mark of that bigness, and he dropped as though he'd got it hard, even if he did get up at her touch. *Hers!* What brought them there together? Can it be that she really looks so low as that?"

Try as he might, he could not keep his vicious jealousy below the surface.

The stage trail had long since been lost to sight, and even the sullen roaring of the waterfall was fading away, now little plainer than the humming of a locust concert, but Taylor kept up his rapid pace through that rough section, plainly anxious to reach a certain spot.

"Only for that long-geared rascal it wouldn't matter so much!" he muttered, pausing at length, brushing the sweat-drops from his face as he gazed keenly about him, more through instinctive caution than from any real fears of being spied upon in that lonely spot. "Only for him there would be no one left to tell how the accident came about. Or—why couldn't he have chipped in a minute later?"

Despite his brutal nerve, he shivered a bit as he thought how narrowly he had escaped being caught in the very act of murdering Jerry Drane by pushing him over the edge of the Flume. If he had—

"He'd have drilled me through the next second!"

Even at that distance the reflection was anything but consoling, and the villain sought to banish it by falling briskly to work.

When another glance assured him that he had naught to fear from spies, accidental or intentional, Taylor sunk to his knees at the base of a slightly overhanging rock, tugging away at a heavy slab of stone which seemingly had lain thus through countless ages undisturbed.

Yet when this slab was moved, it revealed a dark, narrow cavity, barely large enough for a human being to thrust his head and shoulders into. Which was precisely what George Taylor proceeded to do, soon backing out, his hands full of sundry articles of clothing and ornament.

Laying these aside, he stood up and began stripping off the garments he had worn as George Taylor, dropping them in a heap on the other side, to be topped off with a wig and false beard!

Even more rapidly he donned the garments taken from the cunningly arranged *cache*, presently looking an entirely different personage, rigged out in a neat yet serviceable hunting-suit from top to toe.

Hastily rolling up the discarded articles, he pushed them into the *cache*, replacing the slab and carefully dusting it over, then covered all telltale sign before the secret deposit.

With a short, satisfied laugh, he picked up his rifle, sweeping the rocks once more with his

glittering gaze, then turned away, heading up the river, never for a moment dreaming that his secret was discovered, and that by one who would not scruple to make the most of it!

CHAPTER XIV.

A SPECULATING TRAMP.

YET such was the fact.

From the instant when he fired that cowardly shot at Mark Mason, the villain who had given the name of George Taylor had hardly made a move or taken a step which was not noted by a pair of keen if little and bleared eyes—the eyes of "Uncle Billy," the mountain mendicant!

We last saw him when, blinded by that cutting whip, furious at the complete failure of his plans, which, it is no more than just to say, contemplated nothing worse than a fright to the fair equestrian which should place in his possession either money or its equivalent, for the purpose of buying more bad whisky, he hurled the stone that stung the spirited mustang to temporary frenzy.

Reckless, unprincipled though Uncle Billy was, the sight of that mad runaway in such dangerous quarters, partially sobered him. As by instinct he knew that the ending could hardly be other than death or broken limbs for the maiden, and like the miserable coward he was, he turned and fled from the scene as fast as his rather scant allowance of wind would permit.

"They'll never know how it come ef *she* cain't tell, an' ef *she* kin, then I'll lie out o' it like a major!" he panted, slackening his efforts when a ridge was placed between himself and the spot where he had attempted to enforce a contribution to his own needs. "An' I never meant nothin' to hurt, anyway! Ef *she* hadn't got so durn bad skeered! An' ef *she* hadn't bin so pesky free with that rawhide—ugh!"

He gingerly wiped his hot and smarting face. Its beauty was by no means increased by what had happened, for Jessamine had used her whip to good advantage, and several livid stripes crossed his fat cheeks.

"I wouldn't 'a' hurt her even a weenty bit," still trying to shift the blame of what he felt morally certain must have happened, from his own shoulders to those of his innocent victim. "All I axed was would she give a pore devil a dollar or so. An' she so rich she wouldn't never 'a' missed it. An' me with never a red in my kicks! An' jest choked all up fer a bit o' whisky!"

The thought set him to coughing huskily, and after a careful look about him, he decided upon his course, stepping out briskly and like a man who has some definite object in view.

"Ef they're livin' thar yit—ef nothin' hain't happened to 'em sence I've bin gone—who knows? Let Uncle Billy ketch a stake from the kids, or the ole woman—devil toast her fer a clipper 'ith her p'izen clapper!" fairly snorting out his disgust thus awakened. "It's dollars to cents that I hev to shet off her wind jest to keep from gittin' talked to death in a holy hurry!"

He was heading for the Flume, meaning to cross Roaring Fork by the bridge, and thus speedily gain the mining-town. If he could do this, and secure money enough with which to pay for a shave and hair-cut and possibly a decent suit of clothes, might he not, even should the story of the mountain tramp get out in full, escape detection thus?

"Or why can't I lie it onto my pardner, buildin' him up 'cordin' to the story the gal tells, ef *she* ever does tell?"

Uncle Billy gained a point overhanging the stage trail, and while searching for a practicable way of reaching the Flume, he caught sight of Mark Mason and Jessamine Clare standing on the rock above the fall.

Not a sound escaped his blanched lips as he sunk down upon the rocks, staring at the lovers, seemingly so certainly doomed to death.

He could not explain how they got there, nor did he try. All he had room for just then was the knowledge that but for his brutal deed, nothing of this could have occurred.

Low, degraded, evil though he was undeniably, Uncle Billy was not wholly depraved, and he suffered miserably while watching that hapless couple. As yet he had recognized neither, further than feeling assured that the woman must be the one whom he had halted up the river. The distance was too great, and the whirling mists from the fall almost incessantly veiled them.

He saw the huge tree come floating down, only a few moments after his eyes fell upon the lovers, and he was a breathless witness to all that followed, even to the foul shot which George Taylor fired at Mark Mason, though Uncle Billy could no longer see the lovers from where he crouched in hiding.

"That lets me out, I reckon!" the tramp muttered to himself, a peculiar light gleaming in his bleared eyes. "Ef they's any long talk goin' on, I kin sw'ar the shootin' onto that durn critter! An' ef the shootin', why not all the rest, too?"

From his biding-place he watched the further actions of the desperado with keenest interest, stealthily dogging him as he beat a hasty retreat from the vicinity of the Flume, enabled to do this with less risk than might be expected,

thanks to Taylor confining his watch to the lower regions rather than looking above.

After the ridge was crossed by the desperado, however, Uncle Billy found his self-imposed task far more difficult, and its success cost him a vast amount of panting and short breath.

More than once he was tempted to risk a shot at the villain, but he not only distrusted his rusty, shaky revolver, but also his own skill and steadiness of hand.

"I couldn't hit a barn ef I was set up inside o' it, jest now!" he panted, in disgust, giving over that desperate expedient. "An' I do reckon he'd jest punch me too full o' holes fer me ever to hold wind, water or whisky any more—I jest does, now!"

If he could only "place" the fellow! But that he could not do, and so he doggedly persisted in the effort to track him home, if home the precious rascal had.

And when almost at the point of exhaustion, Uncle Billy saw his game come to a halt, sweeping the ground about him with glances which could only have one meaning. And lying flat on his stomach beneath a friendly bush which grew close alongside a rough mass of rock, the spy waited and watched for his reward.

Secure in his snug covert, Uncle Billy watched the opening of that cunning *cache*, as well as all that followed, grinning and even breaking into a low laugh as he did so. Truly, his weary chase had met its reward.

"The more trouble the bigger game they is hid abind it—don't I know that much?" he chuckled, parting the leaves which interfered with his espial, eagerly studying that face and figure, until he felt that he could take oath to them among ten thousand men.

He never moved from his hiding-place when the villain strode rapidly away from the *cache*, rifle carelessly resting in the hollow of his left arm, the very beau ideal of a sportsman, the very opposite in all respects to the outside passenger whose name was on the way-bill as George Taylor, bound from Summit to Tip-Top.

"Go your way, critter!" blandly murmured the tramp, waving a dirty paw after the vanishing shape. "Ef you wasn't hangin' out mighty nigh this place, you wouldn't hev sech a handy dressin'-room. Ef you wasn't a durn rascal, you wouldn't need any sick. Ef you wasn't well heeled, you wouldn't kerry sech fine duds an' sech a fine 'peater. An' ef you wasn't none o' them—waal, mebbe I wouldn't be takin' so durn much trouble fer to know ye better."

Uncle Billy watched the man until he vanished in the distance.

"Goin' to cross Roarin' Fork at the ford, I reckon," though there was just the shadow of a doubt on his whip-marked face. "Ef he didn't hang out at Tip-Top, what's he doin' afoot-back this fur? An' how'd he know them critters down yon' bad enough fer to shoot—which? The he, fer rocks!" a sudden light flashing into his countenance. "An' why? The she, fer more rocks!" breaking into a busky laugh that shook his figure from crown to sole.

"The green-eyed monster, fer sure! An' that's comin' my way, or I'm a bigger liar than the law 'lows. All it lacks is knowin' right whar to find the critter, an' that's in Tip-Top, mighty nigh dead sure. An' when I kin clap a claw onto him—waal, ef he don't lay yaller coin faster than the ole goose ye read about in List'y, I want to know."

For the time being Uncle Billy appeared to forget the sins of which he himself was guilty, having room only for thoughts of that other criminal. And among them was a vague wonder why the fellow had gone to so much trouble and time in disguising himself.

"Mebbe they's somethin' hid away in that hole as 'll 'spain the nigger-na," he mumbled, cautiously rising to his knees, pausing to make sure that the mysterious stranger had indeed vanished from sight. When fully assured on that point, he rose erect and hastened down to where the slab of stone concealed the discarded disguise, if no more important secret.

It proved a severe test of his strength to move the slab, but he finally succeeded, and then proceeded to investigate the contents of the *cache* with all the gusto of a child ransacking the forbidden treasures of an old-time attic.

He thrust his head and shoulders into the cavity, exploring with his hands, but the result only confirmed his first impression that the slab concealed nothing more than an artificial opening, not a cave. But small though the hole was, it appeared to be well stocked.

Of course the first object on which his hungry fingers closed was the disguise which the villain had worn as George Taylor, and Uncle Billy, drawing back, fell to investigating this more closely, after a precautionary gaze about him.

"Findin's is keepin's ef they's ary thing—glory to the ram!" he chuckled in high glee as he felt the shape of a bottle or flask in the bundle. "Whisky, I guess! Brandy, I hope! Emptiness 'd kill me!"

With trembling haste he brought the flask to light, hastily unscrewing the top and gluing it to his lips.

Certainly not emptiness! That could never have brought such a glow of perfect bliss into

that face, though the little eyes were closed. Nor emptiness draw that sigh of deep content from his aromatic lips as the flask was lowered, at length.

"Good Lawd! that never come out o' Tip-Top, or they's a shebang bin started thar sence I sampled 'em all!" he ejaculated, lovingly eying the receptacle as he added: "Jest one fault to find, an' that is, she ain't a hull bar'l Ef it was— Hellow!"

In turning the flask about in his hands, admiring its rich yet neat style, his little eyes rested on a monogram etched in the silver plate, though a casual glance might pass over it as only a bit of ornamental work.

"Thar's a big H, an' a big M, an' a—durned ef the cobwebs ain't so thick in my throat I cain't jest see cl'ar!" he chuckled, lifting the flask to his lips and slowly elevating it until the bottom pointed toward the zenith.

He maintained this position until the last drop of the loved poison trickled from the flask, heaving a regretful sigh as he was forced to realize this fact.

"That's the wu'st o' these weenty bit bottles," with a mournful wag of his head as he sniffed at the little opening before replacing the silver cap. "Ef it knowed how to fill itself up jest as fast as a feller emptied it, I wouldn't ax nothin' better in this life! But es sech a merrycle cain't be, s'pose we look fer 'nother bonanza!"

But if Uncle Billy hoped to discover another flask of liquor, he was doomed to suffer disappointment, for no such treasure turned up.

He unearthed two other suits of clothes, each befitting a distinctive character, with wigs and beards to each one, but as the pockets of both were found empty, he quickly pushed them back into the hole again.

"This is my honey, I reckon," as he curiously inspected the beard and wig so recently worn by George Taylor. "An' met-be 'twon't do no mighty harm ef I jest tote 'em along. I don't reckon they'd fetch sech a mighty pile o' ding-bats at auction, or ef shoved up the spout, but—they's a heap o' speckilation into 'em fer all that! All it wants is to run up ag'inst the right man, an' I'm goin' to keep huntin' ontel I do find him! Then—waal, Uncle Billy'll jest set up in business!"

CHAPTER XV.

DANDY ANDY'S PEDIGREE.

JASPER CLARE stood watching Andrew Griffin as long as his trim, fashionable figure remained in sight, then drew a long breath that was not far from being a sigh. Hardly of grief, however, judging from the words which dropped almost unconsciously as he saw the Diamond Detective enter his hotel:

"I'd give a blessed pocketful if it was out of the world you were going, instead of into it!"

His grim play on the name of the hotel brought no light to his face, and there was dark, deep trouble to be read in his eyes as he turned back to the room in which he had entertained his visitor.

Dropping heavily into a chair, Jasper Clare bowed his face upon his hands, resting both elbows on his desk, resigning himself to thought which could be neither light nor pleasant.

Among other things he recalled how close together he had seen their heads—the heads of that scented sop and that of the girl for whom he had undergone so many restless hours of late—when slowly passing by the little bakery. Passing, not because business drew him through that quarter of the town, but because he fairly hungered for a sight of that fair young face.

"Curse him for a purring tiger!" suddenly lifting his head and crashing his clinched hands on the desk before him. "What brings him here? What keeps him, unless—"

The harsh, unnatural sound of his own voice seemed to startle the Boss of Tip-Top, for he cut his words short, flashing a swift glance around the room, as though more than half-expecting to find himself with company, instead of alone.

With the manner of one who strives to banish unwelcome thoughts, Jasper Clare unlocked a draw in his desk, taking out some papers and bending his head over them, slowly shifting one for another, as a man might do who was trying to thoroughly master their contents.

He kept at his task doggedly, though the effort was plain, and the result anything but satisfactory to himself. His usually iron will was of no avail now. He could not concentrate his thoughts on other than the scene which he had witnessed that afternoon, and the principal actors in it.

"Look out, you!" he uttered, barely above a whisper, but harsh and full of concentrated hatred, mingling with menace as his eyes flashed a glance through the window looking toward the World Hotel. "I hoped the past was dead. I hoped never again to play the red hand. But—if you're wise, Dandy Andy, you'll pull out o' Tip-Top in a hurry!"

Few of those who honored and looked up to Jasper Clare as a model of business honor, probity, and respectability would have recognized that passion-inflamed face just then! And fewer still would have given their model credit for the dark and troubled past which was revived by that fierce outburst.

Clare himself seemed half-frightened by his unusual ferocity, for he lost a good bit of his color as he glanced toward the door, like one who suspects the possibility of eavesdropping.

He forced a laugh at the wild idea, a moment later, then again tried to busy himself with the documents. As before, the effort was a failure. Admitting this, he thrust them back into the drawer, closing and locking the receptacle as before.

Snatching up his hat he left the house, striding swiftly along the lonely street until reaching a saloon. With a short nod of greeting to the attendant behind the bar, he poured out a heavy dram and swallowed it at a gulp. His hand was still grasping the decanter, and only for catching the faint surprise written on the face of the barkeeper, Clare would have repeated the dose. As it was, he muttered something, he never knew what, paid for the liquor and left the saloon.

Three several times he repeated this action, though never until that day had any man in Tip-Top known him to drink recklessly. Yet the powerful liquor had no more effect upon him than if the draughts had been so much limpid water.

Outwardly this was the case, but his brain seemed on fire, and he grew less able to fight against the temptation which was assailing him with steadily growing force.

"Why not?" he inwardly debated. "The silly little fool can't fully realize what a dirty cur he is, with his frills and his scallops, his smiles and his quirks! I'll spoil that baby mug of his if he don't skip out—*too quick!*"

He paused with a start, the color fading just a bit in his face as he saw whither his footsteps had led him; directly opposite the bakery where the young couple, popularly known as the "Twins of Tip-Top," lived under the guardian wing of worthy Sally Bunch.

Through the open door Jasper Clare caught a glimpse of Annie Mason, her fair head bent over—was it a letter? or was it a photograph?

The Boss of Tip-Top did not pause to answer either of these questions, but crossed the street with hasty strides, entering the bakery and ascertaining by a glance that Annie was alone behind the counter.

She glanced up at his step, and her color deepened a trifle as whatever interested her vanished from sight beneath the counter, so deftly that even his suspicious eyes had failed to recognize its identity.

"You wish—how can I serve you, Mr. Clare?"

That musical voice, just the least bit shy and unsteady, seemed to calm his heated brain and steady his jangled nerves. Once more he was the cool, clear-witted man of business, so far as outward seeming went.

He stood quietly before the counter, one hand lightly resting upon the barrier, the other slowly passing over his beard. There was a grave, half-pitying light in his eyes that gave Annie a little uneasiness as she noted it, and faintly uttered:

"Mark—brother—nothing has happened to him?"

"Not to my knowledge, Miss Mason," quickly reassured the mining magnate. "As I told you, I gave him leave of absence this afternoon. No doubt he is improving it by one of his strolls into the hills."

"I feared—I did not know," stammered the maiden, her eyes dropping before that steady gaze. "I have felt uneasy all this afternoon, as though something serious was on the point of happening. They say that twins—I beg pardon, sir," flushing vividly. "Can I serve you in any way to-day?"

"Yes," was the quick response as he flashed a half-frown toward the closed door, leading to the living rooms back of the shop, from whence came the shrill, cracked notes of a camp meeting hymn. "You can, and serve yourself at the same time, Miss Mason. Shall I tell you how?"

Annie murmured something which he took as an assent.

"By listening to my warning, Annie, without taking offense where only good is intended. Do you know—you can't know what sort of character that fellow bears, or you'd shut the door in his face as—"

"I don't understand, sir!" faltered Annie, flushing warmly, then turning pale as swiftly.

Jasper Clare noted this, and he knew that she did understand, at least in part. The fact helped to steady him again, and he spoke in a grave, earnest, almost parental manner.

"I mean the person who calls himself Andrew Griffin. The fellow whom I found in here a short time ago, who—"

"A simple customer, sir, whose money we need to help keep the wolf from the door," coldly interposed the maiden, something like a flash of resentment filling her bright eyes.

"You are angry at me for being so officious, Miss Mason, but even at the risk of incurring your dislike, I must perform what I believe is my bounden duty.

"That fellow introduced himself to you as Andrew Griffin. Possibly that is his rightful name. I can say nothing to the contrary. But beyond that one point, he has lied to you as to all Tip-Top!"

"You forget, Mr. Clare, that—"

"I forget all else when I see that vile hunter of men fawning at your feet, Annie," was the impetuous interruption. "I forget everything else when I see him here at all hours of the day—"

"As a paying customer, please bear in mind, sir!" flashed Annie, her hand trembling just a bit as she reached toward the little bell standing on the counter, by means of which a customer could summon attendance should the shop be empty for the moment.

But Jasper Clare caught her hand before she could summon Sally Bunch from her work, and held it so firmly that she could not release it without a struggle.

"I must say more, now I have said so much, Annie," his tones growing unsteady, his eyes glowing redly. "I'll give you the pedigree of this human bloodhound, then if you will rush into his snare, it will leave my mind free from blame."

"Dandy Andy he is called in Tip-Top. The Diamond Detective he is even more widely known in other circles. He is a detective from choice—he runs men down to a shameful death through pure love of the hunt. And there is where his diamonds come from; each one has been bought with blood-money! To each one hangs a dead man!"

"You shiver! You tremble and turn pale?" with a short, harsh laugh. "Yet you smile upon the man who wears them! You blush as your little ears drink in his lying words! You—"

Annie freed her hand from his grasp, but she made no effort to strike the bell. Instead she confronted the half-mad, half-drunken magnate, her face white but fearless, her eyes glowing vividly, her tones low but even and clear:

"You have no right to speak to me in this manner, Mr. Clare, and if you have nothing more pertinent to say, I beg that you will excuse me from listening further."

"If I have—Annie!" his pent-up passions fairly bursting all barrier, though nothing had been further from his intention when he crossed that threshold. "Can't you see? Are you so blind? It is love—wild, blind, unreasoning if you will, but love such as only one man in ten thousand is capable of feeling for a woman! If it were less, think you I could dare your hatred thus? If I loved you less madly, less entirely, wouldn't I risk the rich reward I covet by denouncing that bloodhound—that cur on whom I saw you smiling and—"

The words stuck in his throat, so intense was his emotions, and as he gasped for breath, Annie Mason managed to utter:

"I never—you must not speak—"

"I must and shall, my angel!" Jasper Clare interposed, swiftly catching her hand as it once more moved toward the bell. "Annie, I love you with all my heart! I ask you to become my wife! And once we are married, I'll take precious good care that hound never comes near enough to breathe the same air with the girl he thought to snare!"

Annie Mason made one effort to free her hand then stood pale and unresisting, her eyes fixed steadily upon his flushed face, though her cheeks gained color as she heard these words. They sounded so confident, so sure of success! Despite his strong emotions, Jasper Clare acted and spoke like one who never even dreamed of rejection!

Something in that steady gaze cut his swift speech shorter than he intended, and as his voice died away, Annie spoke, clear and cold:

"Under other circumstances, Mr. Clare, I might thank you for this honor; no doubt you consider it such. Now, after your brutal conduct, I simply say that I will never marry you. I do not, could not love you. And one more scene like this would make me—despise you, sir!"

She freed her hand and struck the bell sharply. Just in time!

Fairly beside himself with rage and chagrin, Jasper Clare leaned over and grasped her in his arms, hoarsely crying:

"You refuse me? You dare to—"

"Get out, you pesky critter!" came a shrill, cracked treble, as Sally Bunch shot into the room, brandishing a dripping mop, to sweep it fairly across the face and eyes of the magnate of Tip-Top!

He did "git out," with more haste than grace!

CHAPTER XVI.

A BROKEN-HEARTED FATHER.

NEVER mortal man suffered a more complete defeat! Never ardent lover left the presence of his lady-love in such shameful disorder!

Slender though her arms might be, Sally Bunch was muscular enough to wield that familiar weapon with wonderful effect, and slapdash! The dripping rags saluted the face of the magnate until, blinded, choking, cursing, spluttering vicious threats, he reeled out of the little shop and beat a hasty retreat!

"Talk to me! Say you won't! Cuss an' blaspheme like—"

Sally Bunch broke off with a frightened cry as she turned to see Annie sinking against the wall, white, shivering, fainting!

She was sinking to the floor when Sally caught her in her arms and bore her back to the living room, resting her on a bed, moaning and sobbing over her like one going distracted.

But despite her agitation and fright, Sally Bunch did not entirely lose her head, and in the course of a very few minutes Annie looked more like her natural self once more.

Then came explanations, though, somehow, Annie omitted all mention of Andrew Griffin. Apart from that, she concealed nothing.

Sally Bunch was too thoroughly astounded to say much, at first. The knowledge that Jasper Clare—the Boss of Tip-Top, the man whose wealth seemed far too great for one person to estimate alone—had asked a poor girl like Annie to become his wife, literally stunned the ancient maiden for the time being.

Hardly less incredible was the fact that Annie had rejected such a truly dazzling offer.

"An' him able an' willin' to feed you on melted gold every meal o' your lawful life!" gasped amazed, bewildered Sally.

"I'd sooner marry a—a toad!" sobbed the agitated girl.

But as the evening grew on, both became calmer, more reasonable. And neither could deny that, taken all in all, it was a very unfortunate affair. Not that Annie at all regretted the reply she had given her rude suitor; if he was the last man on earth, she could never even think of marrying him, she declared. But what would be the end?

"He'll turn off Mark, I reckon," muttered Sally, dolefully.

Annie sighed, faintly, tears again dimming the brightness of her eyes. Far better than Sally Bunch she realized all that this might mean to poor Mark. Although he had never ventured to confide his hopes and fears even to her, Annie knew right well how passionately he loved Jessamine Clare. Now—

How much worse than a simple discharge from the position he had filled for two years!

A simple rejection might be overlooked by even one who was so used to seeing all others yield meekly to his imperious will, but what followed—never! All else Jasper Clare might forgive, but not Sally Bunch's mop!

Worrying over this, Annie felt too ill to rise, and she was lying on the bed, longing for yet dreading the return of her twin brother, when a coarse voice in the shop gave her a fresh start.

"Durned ef you ain't still a-kickin', ole gal! An' hyar I've bin buggin' my lonesome self with the idee that Satan hed gathered you to his arms these many a long day! Sally, ole—"

"Git out, you!" shrilly cried Sally Bunch, spitting like an enraged cat as Uncle Billy actually caught her in his arms, trying to drop a kiss of greeting on that vinegary visage.

"Waal, ef you don't know what's good, Sally, 'tain't fer me to 'lighten ye 'gainst yer own will," chuckled the tramp, letting her go and passing around the end of the counter. "How's business, anyhow?"

Sally divined his purpose, and with more agility than grace she actually leaped over the counter, cutting him off from the money-till. With a swift motion she locked the drawer and secured the key.

"No, ye don't, Bill Mason!" she defiantly cried, nothing abashed by the ferocious scowl with which he disfigured his bloated countenance. "You've done your last robbin' o' the orphans! You've hed your last red cent o' our hard airnin's, an' the quicker you make up your mind to that, the less hair you'll lose—mind that, now!"

Little, wrinkled, frail though she seemed, just then the half-drunken tramp would almost as soon have tackled an enraged wildcat. And dissembling his anger as best he could, he put on a shocked, reproachful expression as he murmured:

"Sally, Sally, fer shame on to ye! An' me jest wantin' to see ef trade hed bin good or contrariwise! An' me no more thinkin' then—"

Pale, frightened, with a sick fluttering about her heart, Annie stood in the door, glancing from one to the other as she faintly asked:

"Sally—who is it? Not—not—"

"Yore pore, wanderin' but 'pentant pap, honey love," whined the disreputable wretch, extending his arms as though eager to embrace his child; but with a faint cry of fear and aversion, Annie shrank back.

"I can't—we thought—"

"Thought I'd gone up the flume, eh?" supplied Uncle Billy, showing his shaggy teeth in a grin that was half a menace as he followed the poor girl into the living room. "Mebbe you even went so fur's to hope that was the way? Mebbe you even wished the Ole Boy hed ketched me by the heel fer a-flyin' trip down to—eh?"

"You are cruel to speak so, father," said Annie, rallying with an effort. "But—if you had treated us better, we would have felt more like welcoming you home again."

Uncle Billy dropped into a chair, extending his legs, thrusting his dirty paws into his pockets almost to the elbows. And as he gazed into the pale, pained face of his daughter from under his beetling brows, he hardly formed an agreeable picture.

"An' that's all I git fer comin' back to draw my last breath under the honest ruff-tree which my sweat an' weary bones raised up to kiver my two ongrateful children from the rain an' the snow an' the bitter damp dews o' poverty an'—"

"Ketch you!" sniffed Sally Bunch, closing the door behind her lest some customer might enter and detect that unsavory addition to their little circle.

"You shet trap, Sally!" scowled Uncle Billy. "Who hires you? Who pays your wages? An' was they anythin' into the contrac' that 'lows a servant-gal to chip in when the lord an' master is preachin'?"

Sally was silenced, for once in her life. His impudent assumption of authority after all that had passed, fairly chained her nimble tongue. And Uncle Billy chuckled grimly as he saw as much.

"Ef they is sech, Sally Bunch, please p'int it out in the contrac'. Putt your finger onto it, an' lend me your specs ontel I kin spell the meanin' out loud."

"Specs!" That was the cap-sheaf! And then Sally Bunch found her tongue. And then Uncle Billy was forced to listen to more plain truths than had fallen across his path in life for many a long day!

Poor Annie lay on the bed, her face buried in a pillow, her hands clasped over her ears, too utterly miserable to interpose, too wretched to say a word to check that unseemly dispute. And yet—

"What would he say? What would he think?"

Not Jasper Clare, be sure! It was at this juncture that Mark Mason returned to his home, and as he recognized that voice, as he saw that ragged, dirty, bloated figure, knowing that this was his own father, the blow seemed to crush the very heart within him.

For now he felt morally sure of what he had only feared: that to his own father Jessamine Clare owed all she had been forced to suffer that day!

Uncle Billy saw something in that white, tensely drawn face that checked his rough bluster, turning even his half-drunken request into a whine. And when the sinewy fingers of the young mountaineer closed upon his arm, though he visibly flinched, he offered no resistance as he was led out of the room, through the kitchen, into the back yard.

"Don't look much as ef you was b'ilin' over 'ith gladness fer to see the pore old daddy come home ag'in, sonny," whined the rascal, sniffing as though he found it hard work to keep back the tears. "An' ef yore pap axed for a snort, 'twasn't all fer love o' licker, but more to let him down easy in his chokin' joy to git back to the ole home! An' ef they ain't any p'izen handy, why we won't kick up a row over it, sonny, will we, eh?"

He might better have spared his breath. Instead of melting, his hypocritical whine only hardened his son.

When fairly clear of the house, Mark released that firm grip, facing the rascal about so that there was no way open for his escape before permission was granted. Then he spoke, in low but resolute tones:

"You have forfeited all right to be called father, or to be treated as such. Stop!" with a stern dignity that actually awed Uncle Billy. "You shall bear me out, once for all. Then—the sooner you go your way and leave us to go ours, the better for us all!"

Uncle Billy staggered as though heartsick and faint, gasping:

"An' him my boy ever sence he was a kid! An' me his lawful married pap! Kickin' me out—fusin' fer to let me draw my dyin' breath under his ruff—an' me a-dyin' this precious minnit!"

"It was to avoid the necessity of actually kicking you out that I take the trouble to fetch you here," coldly uttered Mark, his lip just curling with scorn at that miserable attempt at pathos. "You know how you left us. You robbed us of every penny, leaving us—two weak, pitiful children—to starve or subsist on charity. In doing that, you forfeited all future claims on our love or filial obedience and dutv.

"It is no thanks to you that we are alive. It is no thanks to you that we did not stray from the right path—that we are respected by our neighbors, instead of being outcasts and criminals. If we are making an honest respectable living, it is not because you helped, not because you failed to do all you could to ruin us, mind and body and soul."

"As time went on, we began to dread your return. More than once, knowing what you did, what you were, what you still would be if alive, I have prayed to Heaven that you might be dead."

"Good Lawd! an' him my own nat'ral born kid!" groaned Uncle Billy, wringing his hands as though fairly overcome by mingled horror and grief at such unfilial words.

"You have returned, but you shall never curse my poor sister with your company. You shall never drive her to a premature grave, as you drove our sainted mother, if all is true that is said."

"Who says it?" blustered the rascal, almost fiercely.

"I say it," was the stern response. "And I say that you have not improved with the years that have passed since your robbery and flight, for—shall I tell you what crime you have committed this very day?"

Uncle Billy "wilted," and hung his head with a faint groan.

"Thanks to Providence that crime was foiled, but if I chose to tell the tale, all Tip-Top would rise up to lynch the dastard!"

"Don't—don't sell your pore pap, sonny!"

"No son of yours, William Mason, though I may bear your name. And now—listen to the only conditions on which I promise to keep your dangerous secret."

"You will let us all alone. You will leave Tip-Top inside of the week, and never return. I will give you money enough to carry you away and to keep you from starving until you can procure work. I know you will spend it for whisky, but I will have done my duty. Do you agree?"

In silence Uncle Billy extended his dirty paw, and after a brief hesitation Mark placed therein a number of silver coins. Then, still in silence he pointed to the street. And equally in silence the tramp obeyed, leaving the yard and shambling along through the twilight.

To give a great start a few moments after gaining the street, his little eyes fairly aglow as they rested on a tall, manly figure just passing a lighted saloon; the figure of his longed-for victim!

"Ef it ain't, I'm a howlin' liar!" he chuckled, grimly, hurrying on. "Wonder ef I couldn't sell him a wig an' a baird fer a mask-ball!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MAJOR AND THE DETECTIVE.

WITH only one brief pause by the way in order to permit Major Marion Wilcox to conquer an attack of dizziness, born of that ugly scalp wound, Dandy Andy led the way to the World Hotel, where a single sentence to the worthy landlord procured a comfortable room for the use of the veteran cavalryman.

Not until his employer was safely placed therein, and with a medical man in attendance, did Griffin take the trouble to explain the meaning of his own dilapidated appearance. Even then he said barely enough to let it be known an accident had happened to the stage at the Roaring Fork crossing.

If he could have his own way, even this much would have been concealed, for public attention was what he wanted the least of just then. And when Jerry Drane and Tom McCoy should come to tell their story—

"One might as well send a crier through the town with his bell!" Dandy frowned, biting his lip as he moodily awaited the slow ministrations of the doctor who was looking after the injuries received by the major.

And while waiting thus, his thoughts went back to that brief glimpse caught of Mark Mason and a feminine companion hovering on the brink of the waterfall. He knew he could not be mistaken, so far as the identity of the young man was concerned, and he began to think he could pronounce the name of that companion in peril.

It was his duty to break the terrible tidings to Mark's people, but he shrank from the ordeal. The blow would kill her—the other Twin of Tip-Top! And could his lips pronounce her doom?

"When I have to, not before!" was his dogged decision.

Not that he even dreamed of such a thing as escape from that death-trap. He was morally certain Mark Mason had been dashed to bits amid the scarcely hidden rocks that filled the whirlpool below the falls.

The doctor finished his work, giving an opinion that the major was worth a dozen dead men, and that with proper care he would suffer no serious inconvenience from his injuries.

Dandy Andy saw to having a tempting meal set before the veteran, and by declining to enter into anything like a business talk, he succeeded in winning the major to make quite a hearty supper. When the fragments were removed, he closed and locked the door, producing cigars and a lighted lamp.

"Now, major, I am ready for business, and wholly at your disposal!"

"You received my letter?"

By way of answer Dandy Andy produced that document from his bosom, to which he had transferred it on changing his soiled and torn garments shortly after reaching the hotel.

"Is this the one you mean, major?"

The old gentleman ran his eyes swiftly over the unfolded sheet, then nodded assent.

"I received it to-day, near mid-afternoon," quietly added Griffin, placing the envelope before his employer, first touching the receiving-stamp of the Tip-Top office, then drawing the tip of a finger along the clumsily gummed flap, where marks of tampering were so positive.

Major Wilcox started sharply, his white brows contracting, his thin lips tightening.

"You mean to say?"

"That somebody saved me the trouble of be-

ing the first to read your letter, major. I wonder if he didn't take the trouble to go meet you, too?" correcting himself with a slight frown, "at least to send a substitute!"

The major examined the letter more carefully, holding it where the light fell at a favorable angle.

"There can be no doubt as to its having been tampered with after it left my hands," he decided positively. "But by whom? With what end in view? And why not destroy the letter, rather than awaken suspicions of crooked work? Why return it at all?"

"Just what bothered my brain before you, major," with a short laugh. "I don't love the gentleman for a cent, but I never accused him of being a natural born idiot. Yet—it's either that, or he's giving me a stall!"

"What gentleman? Tell me more plainly, man?" frowned the major.

The detective obeyed, putting into short, terse sentences the facts which have already been placed before the reader. And while speaking he keenly noted the changes which passed over the thin, pale face of his employer.

As he concluded, Major Wilcox laughed shortly, harshly, twin spots of color leaping into his sunken cheeks, his usually mild blue eyes glowing with strong emotion as he uttered:

"The scoundrel! You can doubt longer, Griffin? Then—I tell you in plain words that Jasper Clare as he now calls himself, is our man! Jasper Clare is the one who—"

With a swift movement the detective lightly placed a hand over those lips, smiling faintly as he uttered:

"Is it necessary to let all Tip-Top know, major?"

For an instant it seemed as though the angry veteran would strike that smiling face with his fist, for it rose, tightly clinched. But then the hot glow faded from his eyes and he bowed his head.

"You are right, Griffin. I will not forget myself again."

"And I humbly beg pardon for being so bold," smiled the detective as he sunk back into his seat again. "Better err on the side of prudence, for though we can't say just who are our enemies, it's plain enough that some one is playing a band against us."

"I don't think there can be much doubt as to the head scoundrel, anyway. Who gave you that letter?"

"Tip-Top's most respected citizen, not to mention names; but I can't bring myself to believe that he is really playing against us."

"I can. I know he is. And not only playing against us, but he is the whole head and front of all—confound it, man!" with pettish anger as he nervously pressed a hand to his bandaged head, closing his eyes, like one attacked by a sudden dizziness.

"You are feeling badly, major?" a frown of anxiety shadowing his face as he watched the actions of his employer. "You are worse shaken up than you thought for, and instead of talking business you ought to be resting in bed."

"It is nothing—only a touch of vertigo, I tell you!" sharply interrupted the veteran, dropping his hand and shaking his head as though casting aside the subject once for all. "And I must talk! You must be made to understand that what I hinted in my letter is the plain, positive truth. You have been following a false clew all along."

"If I have, I have, of course; but you can hardly blame me for asking a sight at your reasons for speaking so positively, major!"

Smoothly enough spoke the detective, but his jaws squared, his eyes seemed to contract their pupils. If not his obstinacy, his self-pride was plainly awakened.

Wilcox gazed into his face with a half-smile playing about his thin lips. Evidently his brain was not so seriously affected as to blunt his mental acumen.

"Would I take so much trouble unless I was firmly convinced, my dear fellow?" he asked, more calmly. "Would I travel night and day to join you, without proof enough to convince even you?"

"One would hardly suppose so, but all things are not precisely what they appear, on the surface," smiled the detective.

"Else you would not have wasted so much precious time in following a wrong scent," flashed Wilcox, then hastening to soften his seeming harshness. "Not that I am blaming you, Griffin; don't think it! But the keenest scent will come to fault at times, and this is fated to be your off day."

"I am open to conviction, major, of course."

But Wilcox was once more pressing a hand to his bandaged head, and there was a troubled, half-vacant look in his eyes as he muttered:

"If only—and now the devil is on his guard! If I had only acted on my first impulse. If I had not tried to be so guarded."

"You allude to that unfortunate letter, of course?" ventured Andrew Griffin, hardly conscious of the words he uttered, in his growing anxiety toward his employer.

"Were his injuries so slight, after all?"

"That letter?" ejaculated the old gentleman,

with a start, but rallying as quickly as on a former occasion. "Yes, I meant that letter. To think that it should have fallen into his hands, of all others!"

"I hardly think it is Jasper Clare we have to fear, major."

"Jasper Clare and none other, man!" with sudden energy. "He is the man, I tell you! He is the game I have hunted for so many years!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

IS IT A PUT-UP JOB?

As he pronounced those words, the old gentleman struck his clinched fist upon the table until the lamp rattled, and sent a flash of flame to the top of its chimney.

Andrew Griffin quickly steadied it, then quietly uttered:

"Do you say this from positive knowledge, major, or simply because of this delayed letter?"

There was something in his voice and manner that seemed to calm the veteran, and with a faint flush of embarrassment Major Wilcox sank back into his chair, his tones lower, steadier, more reasonable.

"Have you forgotten what I ventured to write in that letter, my dear fellow? What I said then, I repeat: there is only one of those poor, wronged children living to-day! Now—how many children has this Jasper Clare living with him?"

"One, a daughter," slowly, almost reluctantly answered Dandy Andy.

Major Wilcox shivered perceptibly, his head drooping for a brief space. But then he rallied, his voice unsteady, something like tears dimming his blue eyes.

"Heaven rest his soul! I had hoped, even against hope, that I might find them both, to make what poor restitution lay in my power."

"I believe your prayers will still avail, major," firmly said the detective. "I believe it is you who follow the false trail. I believe those bitterly wronged children are both living, both in this very town to-night!"

"I'd give my good right hand to be sure of that, Griffin, but I am convinced to the contrary. And when I have placed all my proofs before you, I believe that you will admit I am in the right."

There was no immediate response. The Diamond Detective bowed his head upon his hands, covering his eyes and thinking deeply, swiftly, with strongly conflicting emotions.

Even if he had had nothing at stake but his reputation for keenness of scent in finding and following up the right clew, it would have been no easy task to admit his erring; but there was far more than this in the background.

"I don't blame you for being slow to relinquish your carefully planned stroke, Griffin," said Wilcox, gravely, after waiting a few moments, then gently touching the detective on a hand. "I give you full credit for what you have done, and even if you were led astray, it is only once in a hundred. And—if only money was at stake, I don't know but what I'd be tempted to hold back my information until you had time to find the error for your own satisfaction!"

Dandy Andy lifted his head with a light laugh.

"That would hardly be business, major, would it? Now—will you give me a glimpse at those proofs of yours? Or," gazing keenly into the face of his employer, "perhaps it would be better to postpone all further talk until after you're rested? One more night can't matter much."

"Only by giving that scheming scoundrel so many more hours in which to lay his plans for baffling us!" flashed the old soldier. "Only granting him time to run away with the living twin!"

As by magic that terrible vision above the waterfall flashed across the detective's brain, and now he knew who had been the companion of Mark Mason! Where were they now? If this child of Jasper Clare should indeed prove to be one of those long-sought twins, how would the old soldier bear up under such an awful blow?

He abruptly averted his face lest something of his thoughts be divined by the major, but the veteran placed another interpretation on that action, crying out sharply:

"What is it? What are you afraid of, man? Not—merciful heavens!" springing to his feet as though about to rush from his chamber. "He read that letter! He knows that I am on his track! He'll run away with the child and—"

Dandy Andy caught the half crazed soldier in his arms and forced him back into his chair, speaking swiftly, reassuringly.

"Rest easy on that point, dear sir. I thought of it, and placed a trusty watch on Jasper Clare. If he tries to run away, he'll be placed under arrest and held until we can decide on his case."

Of course this was a lie, but Dandy Andy felt that the end fully justified the means. Those fleeting spells of vertigo had awakened his fears, and he dared not permit his employer to remain under such wild excitement.

"I have wished and prayed so long and wear-

ly for this discovery, Griffin, that the bare thought of losing the child now that she is almost within my arms, fairly turned me wild," faintly, brokenly apologized the old soldier as he yielded and sunk into his seat again.

"You have my word that Jasper shall not run away with his daughter this night, at all events," returned Dandy Andy, all the more gravely as he thought how impossible such an event must be!

Once more he tried to gain the major's consent to postpone all further talk until morning, but without success.

"That would waste an hour of daylight, and with the first beams of a new sun you must take me to—to this man who calls himself Jasper Clare," was the almost dogged response.

"Of course I can't put you to bed as I might a contrary baby," smiled Griffin. "But I still think it would be wisest. Your head gives me no little uneasiness. I don't like those dizzy spells for a cent!"

"Only a trifle," impatiently frowned Wilcox, even while he had to close his lids to drive back that sickening sensation. "I'll never know I've been hurt when day dawns. Now—listen to me, Griffin!

"While I was impatiently awaiting a report of progress from you, a man asked for and received an interview, on the plea of important business. At first glance I set him down as a begging impostor, but almost his first words proved how wrongly I had estimated the fellow.

"Never mind just how the ice was broken. It would take too long to give his story in the words he used, though I believe I could do so without missing a syllable! Enough that from him I learned how curiously you had been led astray on a wrong trail!"

"If you can make that equally as clear to me, major!" smiled the Diamond Detective, incredulity in his eyes.

"You have heard the sad story of the past, over and over again," the major added, his face flushing a trifle, his voice a little less steady as he touched on that tender point. "Well, this man told me just how the poor twins were stolen away from their home."

"I believe the papers reported the sad affair pretty freely at the time, didn't they?"

"And you think this fellow gleaned his information from that source, of course?"

"It is barely possible, you must admit, major."

"Do you think I forgot that?" with a flash of impatience in both face and voice. "I led him on, bit by bit, jealously watching for a trap or a slip, but it never came. He told what the papers published, and then he went on to tell me much—much that no man could have known, without having been an actor in that sad crime, or having lived intimately with the dastardly criminals!"

"He was the last, of course," nodded Dandy Andy. "That would be a little less dangerous than playing one of the principals, you know."

Major Wilcox smiled grimly. He saw that if anything this hunter of men was growing more incredulous, and instead of taking offense, he began to feel a grim pleasure in bringing about his discomfiture.

"You are right—this time, my dear sir," with a bow that pointed his pause. "My visitor was not one of the actual criminals, though he frankly admitted that he had shared more than one rich bit of plunder with the men who did kidnap the twins."

"The greater the sinner, the greater the saint!" murmured Griffin.

"He told me that these rascals were paid to steal the twins," his voice faltering a bit as he hurried on. "He told me where they went, and how they covered up their tracks. He told me how they led the public to believe the whole party, men and children, had been drowned. And then he went on to tell me how he came by his knowledge.

"He wandered out into the mining country, at length, and there came across one of his old partners in crime. They lived together, working honestly, until his partner took sick. It was while he lay on his death-bed that the criminal told him all this story."

"As soon as he buried his mate, my man hastened to find me, to make what reparation lay in his power."

Once more the veteran was forced to close his eyes and clasp his throbbing brain tightly. Once more Griffin tried to induce him to seek the rest he so sorely needed, but without success.

"It is not much more, and I'll get it over with," was the dogged response. "He told me that his mate had lost one of the twins, he forgot to learn which; all he knew was that it sickened and died. The other, his partner sold to a man who took a strong fancy to it. He was married, but they had lost their only child a few weeks before. His wife begged him to indulge her whim, and he obeyed."

"That married man was Jasper Clare, of course?"

"Frank Hartley, as he was known at that time," nodded the major. "They went away, and for years the man who sold the child when

so hard up, lost sight of them. But then he came across the man again, though in the mean time he had changed his name to Jasper Clare."

"And this informant of yours?"

Dandy Andy laughed shortly, his lip curling a bit before replying:

"If you prefer to call it accident, yes. I should call it a most bare-faced attempt at murder!"

"You used that term once before," frowning yet, with an uneasy light in his eyes as they closely watched the detective's face. "Why? What reason have you for thinking it anything more than accidental?"

Dandy Andy hesitated a little before replying, but then concluded to tell all that he had gleaned from Jerry Drane and Tom McCoy.

Major Wilcox listened intently, turning paler as he began to realize with what unscrupulous enemies he had to contend.

"Yet you affect to believe that Jasper Clare is an innocent man! You still doubt his opening that letter!"

"Even more now than I did before you told your story and brought forward your proofs," was the cool retort. "Even granting your man told the plain facts of that purchased twin, and granting that Frank Hartley of that day is the Jasper Clare of to-day, what light would your letter have carried to his mind? How could he even guess that you were seeking to find the child he bought and paid for so many years ago? And even if he could gain this light, would he think it worth while to run such risks, to commit such an atrocious crime? Wouldn't he rather trust to laughing at your wild claims, and baffle them by swearing up hill and down that the girl was his lawful offspring?"

Major Wilcox seemed staggered by this swift reasoning, but he had brooded over the subject too long and fondly to yield while a single chance remained, and he eagerly cried:

"But you, yourself, declared that it was no accident! That it was a deliberate attempt to put me out of the way! How can you explain that?"

"I still think that way," with a grim smile. "I believe that the fellow who offered to guide you to Tip-Top was part and parcel of the daring plot. I believe he sent word to his pard, or employer, when to expect you, and that his accident was a ruse to keep from sharing your risk. As to who could or would do all this: who will fall heir to your wealth in case you die before finding the twins?"

"My step-son, Maurice Hall!" faltered the startled soldier.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEACON'S SANCTUARY.

TRADE seemed unusually slack that evening, though "The Sanctuary" possessed a popularity of its own, among a certain class, while few men who followed the "wet groceries" line had a wider circle of acquaintances than Deacon Jones, one of the bright and shining lights of Tip-Top. And so, though it was by no means a serious failing with him, the Deacon politely invited himself to drink with himself, going through the operation in neat style.

"Your best, Deacon," bowing to the shadow in the mirror behind the bar. "Better business, or I'm afraid you'll have to jump the line to skip the sheriff."

In that reflection, probably, lay the origin of his title; name it could hardly be called, of course.

A long, gaunt face, smoothly shaven with the exception of a little tuft on his under lip, coarse, gray, bristling. His hair was cropped close, showing the peculiar contour of his skull; almost flat on the top and sides, so that if separated at his upper lip, it would have formed an almost perfect cube.

His eyes were small, set closely together, cast into the shade by a peculiarly-shaped nose; long and prominent, yet flat and almost square along its ridge, ending in a bulbous lump forming its lower extremity, shining as though painted with vermilion, then coated with varnish.

His frame was large, angular, anything but graceful; his limbs long and knotty at the joints, his hands and feet simply enormous.

"Not pretty, Deacon!" he grimly muttered, nodding at his own reflection in the mirror. "I never claimed that much, but I did count on your having a little more git-thar than this looks like."

The sound of a footstep nearing the door caused Deacon Jones to turn from the mirror, a smile that was not wholly professional coming into his grayish-hued countenance as a tall, well-dressed figure entered the saloon.

"Good-evening, Mr. Norris!" he cried, with a cordial nod. "Glad to see you, for I began to think all Tip-Top was at camp-meeting, or else gone fishing!"

"And feared the Sanctuary would begin to leak before you'd gathered a fresh crop of shingles, eh?" laughed the new-comer, casting a quick glance around the deserted apartment.

"Something in that direction, being it's you, Paul!" a smile in his eyes, though his gaunt visage was almost gloomy in its gravity. "I'm

not trying to rope you in as a customer, or I'd swear I'd spread a report of small-pox to scare the boys away until I could catch up; see?"

"I might do worse than buy, too, unless rumor lies," with a knowing smile, as he leaned carelessly against the bar. "But my talents don't run to that side of the bar, and the ducats flow from instead of toward me. Just a taste, Deacon; with you, of course."

Paul Norris cast a lazy glance at his own reflection in the plate glass mirror behind the bar, straightening up instinctively as most men will do on such occasions.

Tall, broad-shouldered, well-built in every respect, carrying his years with an ease and lightness which many a younger man might have envied, though he was by no means on the wrong side of life: probably forty years of age, all told.

He looked considerably younger than this, thanks to his smoothly shaven face and closely cut hair.

His features were regular, clear-cut and even handsome, though a close student of human nature would have found fault with his mouth and chin, the one a bit sensual, the other lacking in strength and character. And there was something about his eyes: a peculiar, cat-like swiftness of motion, just tinged with shiftness and craft; which ought to have warned those who met him in a contest for anything on which he had set his heart.

To the casual observer, however, Paul Norris was a fine, manly, dashing, whole-souled fellow, free to spend his money, without any hypocritical nonsense about him, yet remaining the perfect gentleman.

"You're not rushed to-night, that's certain," he laughed, having finished his scantily measured dram. "Still, it's early yet, and when the boys begin to come, they'll keep you on the jump. So—Deacon, bring a bottle with you, and let's have a little social, all to our lonesome selves!"

As he spoke, Paul Norris moved toward one of the little round-top tables which, in common with other saloons, the Sanctuary kept for the accommodation of its card-loving customers, though there was no regular game running on the premises.

The Deacon was prompt enough to act on this hint, for, as he often admitted, money was what he kept house for, and recent experience told him Paul Norris was prompt pay.

Of his own accord he added a supply of cigars and the two men were soon "blowing a cloud" over their liquor as they sat opposite each other at the table.

"You're not really doing a bad business, Deacon?"

"I'm making my taxes, if that's what you call good," cautiously responded the other, stealing a keen if furtive look into that cool, careless countenance.

"And you have put by a neat little nest egg against old age, I'm thinking, eh, old fellow?"

There was no reply to this, in words, but Deacon Jones openly scrutinized the face of his companion now, plainly trying to read what lay hidden behind that handsome mask.

"Of course you'll say no, if you venture to say anything at all," easily added Paul Norris, seemingly absorbed in watching the slowly spreading rings of cigar smoke ascending above his head. "If you wasn't so polite, you'd add that it was none of my fool business, anyway. But that's where you'd be 'way off! I've made it my business to find out all these little points, and I know heap sight more about you; about your past life before you came to Tip-Top, for instance—"

"Is it war, or peace, Mr. Norris?" coldly demanded the Deacon.

"Peace until you can't rest, Deacon," was the prompt response, and he leaned over the table, his right hand extended, saying: "Put it right there, old man, and if you can feel a crooked throb, you know how to let out the blood that makes it!"

Deacon Jones shook his head slowly, his tones lowering:

"When I give my hand, my heart goes with it, Mr. Norris. Wait for a shake until you've made things plainer."

The athletic sport laughed softly, withdrawing his hand, though without any signs of anger or chagrin at its rejection.

"Your way goes, Deacon. All I wanted was to let you know I meant flat business from the start. I want you to serve me, but if you'd rather not, no bad blood over it. Of course I meant to pay your price for whatever trouble I might put you to."

Deacon Jones was using his eyes to the best advantage all this while, and while he kept on his guard, it was plain that his doubts and suspicions were gradually lessening in strength.

"You've been a mighty good customer, Mr. Norris, and—"

"I'll be a better one still, if you'll let it go that way, Deacon," for the first time permitting some of his real earnestness to become visible. "It's not a hanging matter I've got in my eye, old fellow. Simply—will you agree to board a particular friend of mine for a short time?"

Deacon Jones cast a swift glance about the

saloon, as if wondering how such a request could be made of him, but Norris laughed shortly.

"Rather too public, Deacon. My friend is so very modest and averse to society, that he'd rather live in a cellar than out in this light!"

"It's a man, then?" slowly asked the Deacon.

"Man, woman or child, what matter so long as I pay your price?"

"Perhaps to enable me to set that price," grimly smiled the other. "Or, it may be, to better guess what sort of meals you want me to serve this very dear friend of yours."

"You're off, there, Deacon," laughed Norris, without the least alteration of color or countenance at this blunt insinuation. "It's no murder case. Or if it must come to that, I'll do the work myself, unless we can strike up another bargain for bigger wages. In one word, yes or no? Can I depend on your aid, old fellow?"

"As long as you pay for my trouble, and don't ask me to strain the law too mighty hard," nodded Deacon Jones.

"And you have a suitable place where—"

Paul Norris broke off abruptly, with a frown and a muttered oath as a couple of men noisily entered the Sanctuary. Deacon Jones rose to wait on them, hurriedly whispering:

"See you later! They'll not stop long."

Norris seemed on the point of rising, as though he intended taking his departure, but catching some words dropped by the new-comer, he resumed his seat, resting his head upon one hand in such a manner that his face was fairly well hidden from observation by any one at the bar.

The two men were talking about the strange happening at the Flume, but neither one seemed any too familiar with the actual facts. All that they let drop worth recording in this connection was the fact that a number of men, including Tom McCoy, were out searching the hills for the strange passenger who was accountable for the whole affair.

"Let me know when you find him, I beg!" grimly muttered Paul Norris, his eyes glowing vividly.

Other customers entered the saloon, and seeing how busy they kept the Deacon, Norris was on the point of beating a retreat, to wait for a more promising hour, when a dirty, greasy, ragged fellow approached his table, hat in hand, uttering in true trampish whine:

"Beg pardon, boss, but ef you on'y could—"

"But I can't, and that settles it," gruffly interposed Norris, looking up with a frown.

"Ef you was to be so kind as to bear me out, boss, mebbe you'd see a way," meekly persisted the other, dropping into the chair recently vacated by Deacon Jones. "Mebbe you take me fer a common tramp, but—"

"Not a bit of it, sir," with a sneer as he deliberately looked the intruder over from top to toe. "I took you for Jay Gould."

"Mebbe my face looks that way, but I'm mighty sure my weasel-skin ain't no kin to his'n," chuckled the tramp, seemingly placed at his ease rather than otherwise by this bit of sarcasm.

"Will you let me see what your back looks like?"

"But ef I ain't no money-bag, nuther be I a beggar, boss," drawing himself up with a clumsy effort at dignity. "What I ax is a chaine fer to make an honest livin'." An' seein' you, boss, I said to myself says I, He's my huckleberry!"

Norris frowned at this persistence, coldly saying:

"I have no work for you. Get out!"

"Then—boss, it's wuss then pullin' eye-teeth, but ef I can't make a stake no other way, mebbe I could coax ye to lend me a few dings onto this yer' relic o' better days!"

As he spoke Uncle Billy was fumbling amidst his rags, and with the last words he produced a pocket flask, silver ornamented, softly placing it on the table under the startled eyes of Paul Norris.

"You wouldn't sea'cely begin to guess what monstrous curious tales that same pretty relic could tell ef it bed two lips an'a tongue as limber as the one I take atween my grinders, boss," he softly added, as with one stumpy finger he traced out the letters forming that monogram. "F'r instance: ef it was to jump up an' set them critters over at the bar on the track o' the pesky critter as kicked up that racket 'long o' Jerry Drane an' his Stiddy, boss!" his voice hissing like that of a serpent. "I've got ye kivered under the table!"

CHAPTER XX.

UNCLE BILLY WANTS A STAKE.

A SIGNIFICANT double click emphasized his speech, plain enough to be caught by the ears of Paul Norris, but too slight a disturbance for others to notice amidst so many noisy voices and clinking glasses.

"I'd hate mighty to spile the looks o' your clothes, boss," added Uncle Billy, with a broad grin on his bloated face, though there was a dangerous light in his bleared eyes, for all his seeming good nature. "Nur I won't 'plode a ca'tridge, nuther, ef you act docile."

"What do you mean? What are you trying

to get through you?" demanded Norris, trying to bluff his way through, though the almost ghastly pallor of his face told how powerfully those few words had affected him. "I don't understand what you mean."

"It's my way o' puttin' it, not the fault o' my facts," the tramp grinned. "Ef you'd ruther, boss, I'll ax these gents to help make you see through the ladder—or, come to think, I reckon it'd be a rope with a hole through one end!"

"Are you crazy, man?"

"Don't you holler fer a 'sylum to chuck me into, boss, fer ef you do, you'll git left—bad!" nodded Uncle Billy, his grin vanishing, his voice, though still too low to attract attention from the others in the saloon, growing colder and harder. "You kin kick, but it'll only stove up your own butts. You kin squirm, but that won't take ye out o' my grip afore I've got all I foller'd ye here fer."

"What is it you are trying to accuse me of?"

"I ain't tryin', boss, but I'm doin' of it, ye want to keep in mind."

"I deny all you insinuate," coldly uttered Paul Norris, though he was still careful to keep his tones too low to attract attention. "I believe that you have mistaken your man, or else that you are crazy. If I could think different, no one gun could keep me from choking the truth out of your foul lips!"

It was a pretty risky bluff, if indeed Uncle Billy had not been misled by a general resemblance; but as a bluff it failed completely.

"The truth'll come too mighty quick, boss, ef you try to kick any longer. An' I'm open to bet this yer' relie, an' these yer' fixin's fer to make a young man look like somebody else's grandpap—"

With his free hand Uncle Billy pulled a portion of gray hair out of his bosom, grinning broadly afresh as Paul Norris visibly started.

"You kin take my word fer it, boss, when I say that it'd pan out the gayest ole top-knot an' baird in seventeen counties! An' when you putt them 'longside yen flask, an' when you know right whar they come from, an' when you know jest who last wore them an' toted that; waal, I jest reckon the hull'd count up right smart evidence afore Jedge Lynch—now wouldn't they?"

"You mean—what do you mean, anyway?" frowned Norris, still trying to avoid committing himself, though conscious guilt showed plainly in every line of his fear-blanchéd face.

"I mean that by one word I could set these fellers onto ye," deliberately added Uncle Billy, pushing the disguise back out of sight, gesticulating with his left hand, while his other was hidden from view beneath the table. "I mean that I kin prove you was the man who knocked Jerry Drane cold. I mean that I see the hull job!"

"I never—I can prove that I never left Tip-Top, even—"

"Even fer a hunt?" interposed Uncle Billy. "Then I'm a bowlin' liar an' a blackmailer an' a nuisance in general. Then the best thing you kin do is to call them gents up an' ax what does sech a durned, p'izen, wicked imp o' darkness deserve fer 'busin' sech a angel o' rectitude as you be! Ef you're too bashful I'll call 'em. I say!" he sharply ejaculated, turning his bloated face toward the bar.

"For Heaveu's sake, don't!" gasped Norris, his last defense broken down by that startling move.

"I say, landlord," persisted Uncle Billy. "Shove a big bottle o' your double best p'izen over this way."

He turned to Norris, hurriedly muttering:

"Smooth yer mug, boss, or thar'll be a racket, sure. Tell him you pay for the p'izen, an'—Stiddy, now."

He saw Deacon Jones starting toward the table at which they were sitting, and dared not finish his warning, but he had said sufficient to put Paul Norris once more on his guard. In his intense relief at this unexpected respite, the unmasked schemer actually smiled as he nodded in answer to the glance of the Deacon.

"An old friend," he bastily explained. "Down on his luck just at present, but he'll bloom out like the posies before another day, unless my pocket goes back on me. A bottle of your strongest Deacon, please."

"Clean as a whistle, an' good as old wheat!" chuckled Uncle Billy, as Deacon Jones turned back to fill the order. "Ax pardon fer the little start I give ye, boss, but I hed to fetch you to your milk. See? Now I reckon we'll git along like a house afire."

Paul Norris made no reply, for Deacon Jones was coming back with the ordered bottle, and his curiosity was already sufficiently excited. And as the landlord deposited the bottle between the two men, a sudden light leaped into his deep-set eyes, and he exclaimed:

"Is it—back again, Mason?"

"Back ag'in, Deacon," with a forced grin that flatly belied the uneasy light in his bleared eyes. "Ruther down in the mouth, as you kin see fer yourself, but sun's comin' up jest over the range, an' then I'll putt on more frills! Ta-ta, Deacon! See you later! Jest now—eh?"

"That's all right, Uncle Billy. I never crowd my patrons."

"What did he call you? Is your name Mason?"

"My name's Eli, an' I'm gittin' thar with both fe-t, boss," grinned the rascal, with a significant leer that pointed his meaning. "I hope you ain't still thinkin' o' 'cusin' me o' bein' off my nut? Ef you be, I kin holler out some more! An' ef I do holler, it'll be fer somethin' heap longer'n a bottle, though mebbe not quite so soothin' to the neck!"

"Come with me where we can talk without so much risk of being overheard," muttered Norris, his eyes drooping before that insolent gaze. "Then you can plainly say just what you mean."

"Seuse me, boss!" bluntly refused the tramp. "I'm just as com'able here as they's any need of. An' a heap safer, I do reckon! Look, you! I'm goin' to putt my gun up, fer I need both hands to drink with. But you cain't play a snap-shot too sudden fer me to yelp out who an' what you air. You sabe, my friend?"

"Why should I mix up in any such row, simply because you have mistaken me for some other man?"

"You'd be a mighty fool ef you run the resk, anyway. Now—let me tell you the straight o' what is turnin' all Tip-Top bottom side up this blessed evenin', boss!"

Uncle Billy poured out a glass of liquor, downing it at a gulp. He refilled his measure, and clasping it in one hand, taking occasional sips, as though his tongue needed frequent lubrication, he spoke:

"Never you mind what tuck me thar, but I was out in the hills the biggest part o' the day. I ketched sight o' the hearse. Jerry Drane was drivin'. A man with gray baird was on the box with him."

"I've heard all this, time and time again!" frowned Norris.

"I ain't lettin' on I'm sayin' anythin' new to ye, boss," grinned Uncle Billy, coolly. "I'm jest tellin' ye what I see with my own two lookin' eyes. An' I see the man slug Jerry, lowin' to chuck him right over the Flume. An' I saw—waal, it come an' went so mighty fast that it ain't so easy to pick it all out bit by bit. An' ef you've heard tell—s'pose we come to somethin' newer!"

"I see two critters out in the river. They looked like they was standin' on top o' the drink, but mebbe you know that big flat rock that shows when the river ain't on a fresh! They was stickin' to that like grim death. A big tree come floatin' down, an' the man critter tuck the gal critter in his arms an' pulled out fer shore! It jest made my eyeballs jingle fer to see how he done it, too!"

"They was 'nother man watchin' the same tthing, but he never knewed I was keepin' one eye onto him, all the time! He never knewed I see him pull a gun an' take a pot-shot at the young feller—my own livin' son, durn ye!" with a flash of parental indignation in his eyes.

"Your son? Then you are—"

"Eli, as I told you afore," resuming his business-like tones as he proceeded with his story. "An' when that p'izen critter shot, he tuck skeer fer fear o' the gal, or the fellers he'd left up the Flume, mebbe. Anyway, he tuck to the hills like he was sent fer, an' hed only a mighty limited time fer to git thar in."

"Jest fer beans I foller'd along abind him, wonderin' whar he was goin' an' ef it'd pay me more to find that out then to bag him with a blue pill. An' then—mebbe you won't b'lieve what I tell ye, boss, but it's a fact that I kin prove to the queen's taste! That man found a hole in the ground—I kin show ye the hole! That man shucked off his rags—I kin show ye the rags! That man peeled his skelp an' his chin—I kin show ye both bunches o' ha'r! An' then he putt on a suit o' huntin' clothes, tuck a Winchester 'peater an' made tracks fer the upper ford o' Roariu' Fork, crossin' over the drink an' makin' his way back to Tip-Top."

"Thar!" with a long breath of relief, closely watching Paul Morris as though trying to read his inmost thoughts. "That's what the man done. Now fer what I done."

"I didn't foller him any furder then his cache: why should I? I hed his face an' figger down to a dot. I even noted the scar on his left hip; done with a knife, I should judge! I knowed I hed him holded jest as sure as ef I'd foller'd him every foot o' the road to Tip-Top."

"So I jest swallered what p'izen they was left in this flask, f'ust 'mirin' them twisted up letters. I tuck the wig an' baird, an' sot sail fer town, reckonin' they was more money to be picked up hyar then out in the hills, even ef I did bev a hull dry-goods shop fer to speckilate onto! An'—waal, I see you come in hyar, an' you know the rest."

"Granting that all you have said be true—which I still deny, so far as I am concerned, mind you!—what are you going to do about it?" slowly asked Norris, now more composed, thanks to the time it had taken Uncle Billy to narrate his story.

"Waal, I did 'low to look ye up an' hev the fun o' watchin' you kick the atmospheric a bit," was the deliberate response, closely noting the effect of his words. "I couldn't sca'ce-ly do less'n that, after the way you tuck a

coward's shot at my kid—Mark, ye want to know?"

"You have had time enough and to spare for all that, yet I am still in the ring."

"An' kin stay thar heap sight longer ef you act white, boss," the bummer declared, frankly. "For one reason—it cuts me deep, boss," with an affected sniffle as he drew a ragged sleeve across his face. "It cuts me clean down to the quick an' all the way back ag'in to hev to say it, but—waal, I went home. I found Mark thar. He hed the show o' your bullet on his head, but that don't count, now!"

"What did he do? Jest up an' kicked me out! Me, his own lawful pap! Jest kicked me out like I never cost nothin'! An' so—see here, boss," bending further over the table, his bleared eyes lit up by avarice as he huskily muttered: "Don't you want to buy my rehess?"

Paul Norris made no immediate reply. He gazed keenly, doubtfully into the face of the rascal opposite, as though striving to look below the surface. And Uncle Billy hastened to add:

"Honor bright, boss! Pay me my price fer the relires, an' I throw your secret into the scales to make weight! Refusa, I'll hang you!"

"I admit no secret, but you can bring your relires to this place to-morrow, and I'll talk it over with you. If you don't like that, tell your story, and see whose word weighs heaviest. Here's a little change for you. Spend it how you like, but don't count too sure on ever making a heavier take out of me, or you may get left, Eli or no Eli!"

Dropping a couple of dollars on the table, Paul Norris turned and left the saloon, leaving Uncle Billy behind to digest those words.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHICH IS THE RIGHT TRAIL?

DANDY ANDY leaned back in his seat, softly whistling, altogether with the air of one who has cast aside all outward troubles. In strong contrast to his companion, whose face was working, whose eyes betrayed the deep uneasiness awakened by this unexpected turn in the subject.

"But what can he have to do with it?" half pettishly. "I have neither seen nor heard of him for more years than I can readily number without stopping to think. He may be dead—I believe he is dead!"

"Peace to his ashes if he has taken the final trip," quietly uttered the Diamond Detective, seemingly more than ready to let the matter rest for the present.

"And even if he still lives, he knows, or ought to know, that my death would not benefit him one dollar! You know—"

"I know that all this talk is doing that head of yours no particular good, major," interposed Dandy Andy, earnestly. "You need rest and quiet, if not so much on the score of your injuries, at least to give you strength and steadiness to face your game in the morning. Think of that, I beg of you, dear sir, and promise me you will retire at once."

Even yet the old soldier hesitated, loth to yield, though he could but poorly disguise the fatigue, if no worse, that was plainly getting the better of his will.

He was afraid to lose even those few hours of darkness, lest his long sought game betake itself to flight, bearing away with him the sole surviving child for which he, the major, had journeyed so far.

It was only after pledging his word that he would neglect no precautions; that he would himself make sure Jasper Clare was under safe watch and ward; that he himself would come to rouse the major at the very first show of dawn; that Griffin succeeded in getting the injured man to bed.

Feeling a little more at ease on the soldier's account since there had been no recurrence of that strange vertigo while moving about, preparing for bed, Dandy Andy sought his own chamber, which was situated almost directly across the narrow hall or corridor.

The nearly full moon shed a faint light through the single window and Griffin made no move toward striking a light. He sat on the edge of his narrow bed, supporting his chin with his joined palms, his brows contracting, his eyes filled with strongly conflicting emotions.

"Have I been barking along the wrong trail all this time?" dropped faintly from his lips. "Has all my work gone for nothing? Am I wrong, and the old gentleman in the right? I could almost wish it!"

The last words came with an emphasis that fairly startled himself, and he cast a quick, involuntary glance around the room, as though he more than half expected to surprise an eavesdropper.

"Not quite so bad as that, Dandy," with a grim smile for the benefit of his more careless self. "But you want to look a little out how you tumble into these sleepy spells with your eyes wide open! What if some shrewd and impudent rascal were to accuse you of being in love?"

He laughed softly as he put this question into guarded words, and under the subdued light of the moon, his face showed softer, his eyes milder. Only for a brief space. Then that

troubled expression returned with greater intensity than ever.

From the very first step, that long and weary trail had been found full of tangles and snarls. Bit by bit, with rare patience and almost marvelous skill the Diamond Detective had straightened the tangles and smoothed out the snarls, until he believed that the long-sought for end was fairly within his grasp. He had only delayed in picking it up until word could go to and come back from his employer.

Instead of the order he naturally expected, came that ominously delayed letter, followed by that nearly fatal affair of the Flume.

"Who set that in motion; Jasper Clare or Maurice Hall? I can't make it come clear that it was the Boss of Tip-Top, letter or no letter, witness or no witness! I'd heap rather pin it on the head of Hall, but what show for that? Where is he? Who is he? If in Tip-Top, he's been smart enough to keep out of my path, at any rate!"

There was scant comfort in following out that line of thought, and Dandy Andy rose to his feet with a shake of his trim shoulders.

"It's got to be done, and if I have to do it, why not right off the handle?" he muttered, turning toward the door as he picked up his hat.

He was thinking of Mark Mason and his possible death; but he was thinking even more of Annie Mason and the awful shock which his message must surely inflict upon her.

"I'd rather lose my best finger than to be the one to carry the news, but it's got to be done by some one, and—maybe I can break it the easiest!"

Leaving his chamber, Dandy Andy tiptoed to the door of the room occupied by his employer, bending an ear to listen intently. He could detect no unusual sound from within, and all seemed to indicate a quiet sleep for Major Marion Wilcox.

"Heaven knows the poor old fellow needs it!" the detective mused as he turned away in the direction of the stairs leading to the lower floor. "He's hurt worse than any of us reckoned, and it will take all of one long night's rest to fit him for work. For a time I began to think he had got his last sickness!"

Dandy Andy left the hotel without entering the office, frowning just a bit as he caught the sound of his own name uttered in an eager voice. The hotel bar was fairly well filled with citizens, no doubt discussing the adventure of the Flume.

"Lucky the point is narrowing down so close," he mused as he left the hotel behind him. "The idiots will be trying to make a rare show out of me for a week to come, and I'd have a gay old time trying to pick up a crooked trail with a pack of sight-seers tagging me!"

And yet—was the end so near at hand? Were the proofs which Major Wilcox brought forward so weak and unsubstantial as he had affected to consider them? Might it not be possible that Jasper Clare held one of those long-sought for twins as his daughter?

"I could almost wish it might turn out that way! Then—the little woman couldn't ask which I was trying to win, the flesh or the mineral!"

Although bound on what he honestly believed was the most disagreeable mission of his life, Dandy Andy would not permit his footsteps to lag, striding briskly along through the streets, lighted only by the intermittent rays coming through the windows or open doors of the buildings. Yet, when he drew near to the little bakery into which he expected to carry blackest gloom and deepest sorrow, even his nerve began to falter, and he slackened his pace.

He was trying to pick the words by which he might break the news most gently, and was even turning them over in his mind, when he gave a great start of amazement, stopping short and dashing a hand across his eyes as though believing them playing him false.

A lithe, graceful figure stepped to the open door of the shop, and Mark Mason himself looked up and down the dim street, as though in search of some particular person or object.

"It couldn't have been him, and yet—"

As the shortest method of solving the enigma, Dandy Andy crossed over and extended a hand as he uttered:

"The very man I was looking for, Mason! Can you spare time for a few words?"

Mark took the proffered hand, but hesitated a little before answering that request. He glanced half-uneasily up and down the street, his thoughts busy with the worthless fellow whom he had so sternly turned away from his door but a short time before. Had he gone? Would he return, trusting to his relationship for protection?

"Of course, dear fellow, if you have any other engagement, I'll try to wait a bit longer," lightly added Griffin.

"I have no particular engagement, though I thought it barely possible some one—a certain person might happen along," said Mark, visibly flushing under that keen though apparently thoughtless gaze. "I'll just ask Aunt Sally to keep an eye on the shop, unless you prefer to talk in here?"

Dandy Andy hesitated for a moment, but then decided:

"If you'd just as lieve, Mason. The fact is, Aunt Sally don't seem just crazy for my society, though I've repeatedly vowed I like her almost as well as I do her delicious cookies! So—I'll wait for you out here, where there's plenty of room to duck and dodge!"

Mark smiled faintly at this pleasantry, but he was not in the humor for jesting just then, even as he understood the gay speaker too well to resent his light speech against that faithful servant.

He stepped back to the door at the further end of the shop, opening it and speaking a few words which Dandy Andy failed to catch; then taking his hat and joining the detective, walking slowly down the street.

"Of course you've heard about my little escapade at the Flume," laughed Griffin, adding before Mark could answer: "But what did you think of the hit you saw from that rock above the waterfall?"

"You saw—you know—"

"Not a single fact, if you have any reason for wanting it kept secret, old fellow," quickly interposed Griffin. "Only—I'd give a good deal to know how in time you got safely out of that scrape!"

"In time you shall know," slowly uttered Mark, his face showing troubled in the moonlight. "Just now I don't like to talk about it. And if you would be kind enough to keep silent, with all others, I'd count it a personal favor."

"Never mention it, dear boy!" with hearty good will. "I'm so glad to find you alive and kicking, when I came here, reluctantly enough as you may guess, to break the black tidings to your—your friends," with a queer catch in his voice. "I never had to brace up more stoutly in all my life! And when I saw you standing there in the door, it just filled me to slopping over with pure delight! Shake—shake twice!"

Mark had to laugh at this enthusiastic greeting, but he felt all the better for it. Just then he sorely felt the need of a true, frank, light-hearted friend.

"And now—as that subject is tabooed," briskly added Dandy Andy, "I'll shoot another question at you. Do you happen to have anything to do with collecting the mail for Jasper Clare?"

"I almost always take his mail from the office, yes," with a look of surprise at such an unexpected question. "I generally post his letters, too. Why do you ask?"

"Was last Saturday one of your off-days?"

"No. I was at work all day, and a part of the evening. I wanted to close up the accounts for—But may I ask why you are so curious?"

"In a moment, please. Were you too busy on that day to go for the mail, as usual?" persisted the detective.

"I brought the mail, yes."

"Then—among the letters for your employer, you didn't chance to notice one bearing my name, did you?"

"Most assuredly not!" with a touch of indignation. "If I had, I would have returned it at once, as wrongly placed in our box."

"Yet, curiously enough, a letter directed to Andrew Griffin, bearing the receiving stamp of Tip-Top and date of last Saturday, was handed me, by Mr. Clare, as having become mixed with his mail."

Mark Mason dropped the detective's arm, turning until they stood face to face, his eyes glowing with poorly suppressed anger as he said:

"Am I to understand that you charge me with holding back your letter, Mr. Griffin?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear boy," frankly replied the other, meeting that fiery gaze with easy composure. "I simply stated the facts, hoping you might be able to explain them. I don't know as I would have thought it worth alluding to at all, though the letter was important, only that delay in reaching me actually led to my little adventure of to-day. Of course I blame neither you nor Mr. Clare for its miscarriage."

CHAPTER XXII.

GROPING IN THE DARK.

"YET you thought it worth while to call me out from the shop to cross-examine me!" somewhat curtly uttered Mark Mason.

"Naturally I felt a little curious, but, I pledge you my word of honor, Mason, I never for a moment dreamed that you could be guilty of even carelessness in this matter. In fact—could the letter have been lost in your office by any outsider?"

"Possibly, though it seems hardly probable. What did Mr. Clare say about it?"

"Nothing more than what I've already told you. But let it drop. After all, it don't matter. By the way—speaking of Mr. Clare: would it be impertinent in me to wish you all imaginable good luck?"

"I don't understand you, sir," frowned the young man, stopping short as though wearying of his stroll. "If you have no further questions to ask, I may as well be getting back to the shop."

"I'll walk that far with you," laughed Dandy Andy, keeping close to his side, plainly bound not to take offense at even so pointed a rebuff.

"I admit having made a clumsy break just now, but as I recognized the young lady who shared your peril this afternoon, you can hardly blame me for wishing the ending might be as brilliant as the beginning was thrilling."

"I beg you will avoid all allusions to that unfortunate affair," said Mark, in troubled tones.

"At least I can ask if Jasper Clare ever had any other children?"

"I believe he had, once. A son, unless I mistake."

"I heard a fellow hint as much, yesterday, but I hardly credited him. One don't often find two pair of twins in a little place like Tip-Top. And this son—he was Miss Jessamine's twin?"

"I think—I am not sure," then adding a little sharply: "If you are so hungry for information, why don't you go to the proper place—why not question Jasper Clare himself?"

"Thanks! That wouldn't be such a bad idea, come to think! You are going in?" as they regained the little bakery. "Well, take care of yourself, old fellow, until we meet again."

Dandy Andy passed leisurely along, buming a soft chorus, apparently the gayest, lightest hearted soul in all Tip-Top. But as soon as he had passed out of sight of the shop, his demeanor changed completely.

"I've made Mark huffy, and for what? Nothing solid, nothing substantial! Only—if there was another twin? If two children were sold or adopted, instead of one? If the major should be on the right trail, and I following up the wrong clew—what then?"

"Just this: I'd be sorry for Mark, since it would double the fortune of the girl he hopes to win for a wife. I'd be glad for my own sake, since Dandy Andy might try his luck without laying himself open to the charge of hunting up an heiress to feather his own nest with her golden plumage!"

Although he had no definite object in view, Dandy Andy was making his way through Tip-Top toward that quarter of which the Clare mansion formed the most prominent feature as well as the handsomest.

He had argued against the possibility of this rich and prosperous gentleman being concerned in any way with the case he had undertaken to clear up, but now he almost began to hope that Major Wilcox might prove right, even if the fact should cast a cloud over his acumen as a detective. If such should be the case, it would relieve him of one growing fear: that which has just been shadowed forth.

He was still brooding over the matter when he drew near to the Clare residence, now dark and bearing not a single light to show that it was occupied, at least from the front.

"There's nothing to learn here, as I know," muttered the detective, after a brief scrutiny of the building from that point of view. "Or, if there is, this isn't my night. I'm feeling too—Hello!"

Just as he was passing by the corner of the spacious yard, a horse and rider plunged into the street, coming from the thickly sodded lot with noiseless hoofs until almost in collision with the detective, who instinctively flung up his hands and grasped the animal by the bits, forcing it to rear and fall back, showing a power of arm truly wonderful in a man of his build.

"Be a little less reckless, my good man, or you might run over somebody one o' these dark nights!" Dandy Andy cried, half-angrily.

A fierce, grating curse was the only reply, unless the vicious stroke of a riding-whip be called such.

Griffin saw the blow coming, and evaded it by ducking and jumping back, letting the horse go free as he did so. And then, before he could recover his advantage, had he so desired, the reckless horseman plunged ahead, galloping rapidly down the street.

"Good-by, Jasper Clare!" muttered Dandy Andy, giving a low whistle as he gazed after that rapidly receding figure. "In a hurry, ain't ye? Feel just angelic, too, judging! Well—I'd give a lead nickel to know just the size and color of the flea that's bit you so mighty sharp!"

Careless, reckless though his words may sound, this adventure gave Andrew Griffin food for serious thought.

"Can he have discovered what happened to our charming daughter this afternoon?" he mused, turning back in the direction of his hotel. "Hardly that, for if he wanted to settle accounts with Mark Mason for getting her into such a dangerous scrape, he'd hardly stop to saddle a horse. Then—is the major in the right? Am I altogether astray? Can it be possible that Jasper Clare opened my letter? That he hired the stage wrecked on the Flume, just to put a possible claimant for his alleged daughter out of the way?"

Questions enough to fully employ the wits of even a smart fellow like the Diamond Detective, groping in the dark as he was, thanks to the fresh elements brought into the delicate game by the events of that memorable day. And feeling the need of quiet and isolation before he should even try to answer them, Dandy Andy made his way to the World Hotel and passed silently up-stairs to his own chamber.

As before, he paused at the closed door of the apartment assigned to Major Wilcox, listen-

ing in vain for any sound from thence. For a brief space he deliberated whether or no he should try the door, to ascertain if his employer was really asleep.

"I'd hear him if anything was wrong, so what's the use?" he finally decided, tiptoeing along to his own chamber, silently shutting himself in, lighting a cigar and dropping on the bed without removing any of his garments.

Lying thus, he set his brain to work, trying to clear away the annoying doubts which had so unexpectedly arisen.

He found it no easy task. Partly because, curious as it may sound at first thought, he was really beginning to hope that all his careful work thus far had been based on a false clew. Perhaps he would have encountered less serious difficulties had he argued from the other side. He had cleared the ground of all conflicting sign, and there the trail lay perfectly distinct up to that very afternoon.

Far above the average of men who follow his peculiar profession, Andrew Griffin was not absolutely infallible. For one thing, he wore a very human heart in his bosom, and for several weeks past this piece of mechanism had been causing him no little trouble and discomfort.

In trying to win the rich reward offered him by Major Marion Wilcox, he had been brought in contact with Annie Mason and her brother, or the "Twins of Tip-Top," as they were affectionately termed by those who had witnessed their noble fight against such heavy odds, when deserted by their only surviving parent, "Uncle Billy" Mason.

He firmly believed they were the long-lost children whom Major Wilcox was trying to find, and he knew enough of his employer to feel sure that should such prove to be the case, Annie Mason would become a very rich woman.

"Too rich for a poor devil like me!" he mentally decided, frowning as he thought of the bitter things which would almost certainly be said of him should he win and wed the maiden. "Man-hunter is bad enough, but fortune-hunter—"

Dandy Andy finished his cigar, flinging the stump through the open window, but not lighting another. He closed his eyes the better to concentrate his thoughts, and succeeded so well—or so poorly—that he must have fallen asleep, though such was by no means his intention.

He roused up with a start and an ejaculation, staring around him like one under a most disagreeable influence. What had startled him? A hand at his door? A footprint? A call—had the major summoned him because of that ugly vertigo?

At that thought Dandy Andy sprung off his bed and reached the door at a single bound. Hastily unlocking it, he crossed the corridor and grasped the knob of the other door, flinging the barrier wide as he pronounced the name of his employer—to stop short as he saw the unoccupied bed, the empty apartment.

Major Wilcox was gone, but how? For what reason?

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNCLE BILLY IN HARD LUCK.

BOLDLY though he had spoken toward the last, his manner a mixture of contempt and careless defiance, Paul Norris fairly shivered as he reached the gloom beyond the door of the Sanctuary without hearing the deadly "hue and cry" lifted behind him.

The strain had been killing, and now that its success was proven to a certain degree, the reaction came, to make his brain whirl, his lungs fill, his nerves to be unstrung. He staggered like a drunken man as he moved away from the saloon, and it was quite as much this attack of physical weakness as any confidence in that blackmailing tramp that kept him from breaking into headlong flight.

There came no signs of his being followed, however, and gradually that fit of terror began to wear away, permitting his brain to work with something of its usual clearness and rapidity.

Even yet it seemed literally impossible for that tale to be true, as far as his being traced out foot by foot was concerned. And yet—

"If he was a detective, or anything of that sort, why didn't he give me the collar right then and there? And—he had me marked down at every step!"

Once more that blind, unreasoning terror took possession of the villain, and once more he skulked swiftly through the darkest shadows, fearing to stop still, fearing to seek refuge in his chamber, afraid to even look for safety out of town and among the hills.

More than once his hand tightly gripped a pistol, half drawing the weapon from its place of concealment as his wild fancy warned him of pursuit. As often he discovered his mistake, and gave long sighs of intense relief.

Twice he entered places where he could procure drink, each time swallowing a heavy dose, though the powerful stimulant seemed to have lost its strength. He began to experience its effects after awhile, however, and then his whirling brain took a different turn.

As before, he kept thinking of Uncle Billy, but now it was more in deadly hatred than in

fear. Why should he knuckle and cringe to that rascally tramp? Why not—

Paul Norris paused short as that dark question forced itself upon his brain, casting a swift, uneasy glance around him. He was alone, and in a comparatively thinly-settled part of the town. Beyond that he could not say for certainty at his first glance, though he was not long in deciding that, in his unsettled state of mind he had wandered back to the vicinity of Deacon Jones's Sanctuary.

"Is he still in there, swilling away? If so—the deacon may try to find out what business we two had together!" with another shiver of uneasiness. "If the cursed knave were to get drunk, he'd let it all out for a fresh bottle!"

Paul Norris was just on the point of making the best of his way to the Sanctuary, divided between a wish to get Uncle Billy where there would be no fears of his wagging too free a tongue, and a longing to send knife or bullet through his heart, when he was startled by a peculiar sound coming from almost directly behind him.

With a swift, cat-like bound, Paul Norris leaped into the dense shade cast by a building across the narrow street, drawing a pistol and standing on his guard as he did so. The next moment a low ejaculation of mingled wonder and hatred broke from his lips as he recognized the face and figure of the tall man who staggered, rather than strode out of the gloom into the clear light of the moon, pausing near the middle of the street.

To fling both hands up to his head, repeating that gasping, moaning sound. To reel like one suddenly attacked by vertigo. To take another uncertain step, then to sink in a limp and seemingly lifeless heap in the middle of the way!

For a single breath Paul Norris stood as if spellbound, his eyes widely distended, his whole person shivering like a leaf in a whirl.

For in that staggering, falling unfortunate, he recognized Major Marion Wilcox!

"It can't be!" he panted, even yet doubting the evidence of his own senses. "What would fetch him out here, and like this? Or—"

He checked his forward impulse, shrinking back instead with drawn revolver ready for use, flashing keen, fearful glances around the spot where the old gentleman had fallen, suspicious as the fox who has once felt the jaws of a trap.

Wild, improbable as it may sound, he actually fancied for a moment that Major Wilcox was acting the part of a decoy, to draw him within the grip of the Diamond Detective!

This fancy was not lessened at first by the sound of an approaching脚步, and Paul Norris began silently backing further away from the spot, meditating a hasty flight, when his fears began to fade and quite another passion to take possession of his brain.

"It's that devil! If he only—why not make it look that way?"

Uncle Billy was coming up the street, too heavily laden with bad whisky to find room enough on the narrow walks, besides preferring the middle of the street, on general principles.

Paul Norris crouched low within his shadow, waiting and watching, hoping and fearing, ready to improve his opportunity in case matters should turn out anything near what they promised.

"If that bloodhound is on the watch, he'll have to show up when Uncle Billy stumbles over the old man!" muttered the schemer, his eyes glowing like those of a hungry cat. "If he don't—then it isn't a baited trap—for me, anyway!"

Not until he was within a dozen feet of that prostrate figure did Uncle Billy notice it, or distinguish it from less substantial shadows.

"Hellow!" he grunted, drawing up with a lurch that told how heavy a load he was carrying under hatches. "'Nother good man gone—gave right, ef it's pizen that kaled him up that-a-way! Ole man's drunk ag'in, that's what's aildin' Hanner! Wonder ef—ef Uncle Billy knows the gent? Wonder ef—ef he totes a bottle o'—"

The tramp started visibly at his own suggestion, or some still less worthy thought. He cast a swift glance around him, then crept forward until he gained the side of the unconscious man. Even yet he hesitated, and might not have fallen any further, had not a ray from the nearly full moon caused a glimmer by falling across the heavy watch-guard worn by the major.

"A bonanza fer somebody—why not Uncle Billy?" came thickly from his lips, and he dropped upon his knees, clutching the chain in his shaking fingers.

Paul Norris leaped forward, one hand grasping the half-drunk tramp by the neck, his other thrusting a pistol fairly against his temple as he savagely uttered:

"Not a word, not a word, Uncle Billy! I've caught you red-handed!"

"Don't—I just—"

"Robbing the man you've just knocked cold!" interposed Paul Norris with vicious exultation ringing through his words, tightening his grip until Uncle Billy gasped for breath.

The unfortunate rascal attempted a denial,

but his captor would not have it that way. Lifting the tramp to his feet, he rudely pushed him back into the shadow where he himself had lain in ambush. Jamming him up against the unoccupied building, Norris sternly uttered:

"I saw you knock that poor devil on the head. I can take oath to that effect before the officers of the law. I can swear that you were captured while in the very act of robbing your victim. And—if I do swear to all this, Uncle Billy, do you imagine any man in Tip-Top would even listen to such wild, preposterous charges as you might be tempted to bring against me, in revenge?"

"Good Lawd!" groaned poor Uncle Billy, shivering as he felt that grim muzzle pressing against his face. "An' me jest tryin' fer to help the onfortunit critter up ag'in!"

"A liar born and bred, Uncle Billy," laughed Paul Norris, once more his cool, audacious, unscrupulous self since he saw a way to bind the hands of the man who had surprised his dangerous secret. "I can hold you even now! Help me in all I ask or I'll railroad you through, lies or no lies! What is it, man?"

"But I never once—"

"I saw you slug him, then caught you with a hand in his pocket. I am ready to take my oath to that effect, Uncle Billy. Or—shall I blow your roof off, and say you tried to do me up, too, when I bastened to the rescue of your first victim?"

There was more of grim earnest in this speech than may be thought at first glance. If Paul Norris could have felt certain yonder man was indeed dead, he might have acted on his own suggestion, thus effectually removing yet another source of danger to himself and his schemes.

Uncle Billy seemed to fully realize his peril, and meekly yielded to the inevitable, brokenly gasping:

"I cave—you're boss, an' I'm your houn' pup!"

There was no immediate action on the part of the one thus acknowledged master. For that same length of time, the life of the tramp hung by the frailest of threads. But then the reflection that Uncle Billy might possibly have been "pumped" by Deacon Jones, decided Paul Norris against taking such a desperate step.

Besides, he fancied he saw a method of putting this graceless scamp to a better use than filling a grave.

"You admit that you slugged that gentleman?"

"Reckon I must, ef you say so, boss!" groaned Uncle Billy.

"And I caught you robbing him, after knocking him down?"

"Yas—ef it takes the hide off, master!"

Paul Norris laughed shortly as he lowered his weapon, though still holding it in his hand, ready for instant use should the necessity arise. This was a great deal better than having to do the knuckling himself, and the revenge was well worth running some risk for.

"I am your master, Uncle Billy, since I hold your life or your liberty in the hollow of my hand. Just which, depends on how hard you hit yonder, gentleman, you know!"

"I'll give 'em up, boss," moaned the tramp, his will completely broken, his sole thought being how to get out of that pitiless clutch. "I'll never say nothin' more! I'll turn over them relics jest as soon as you want to hev 'em, boss!"

"They've lost all interest for me, Uncle Billy," repeating that disagreeable laugh. "If I use them at all, it'll be to help egg on the gang to draw you up a tree. Shall I do this?"

"Not ef it rests on my say so, boss!"

"It rests on the manner in which you follow my directions, Uncle Billy," his tones growing harder, less mocking as he added: "Serve me faithfully, and I'll not only pay you as much as a score of such relics could have brought you in, but I'll help you out of this ugly scrape as well. What do you say—in a hurry, too?"

"I'll lick the dirt off o' your boots ef you want it that way, boss," murmured the tramp, thoroughly cowed by that stronger brain.

"Get up, you cur!" growled Norris, as the miserable wretch actually sunk upon his knees as though to put his words to actual test.

Uncle Billy rose cringing to his feet, standing with bowed head and trembling form, awaiting what might come next.

"Go see if that man is dead," coldly commanded Norris, pointing a hand toward the motionless soldier. "If he is still living, or if you are in any doubt, catch hold of him and drag him into the shadow. Be lively! And if you try to run, I'll lay you out—too quick!"

With a half-smothered groan of utter wretchedness, the sobered tramp obeyed, stooping for a moment over the prostrate figure, then bending still lower, grasping an arm and slowly dragging the body out of the moonlight and into the shadow where Paul Norris stood waiting.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SATAN FAVORS HIS OWN.

WHILE his newly-made slave was performing this office, Paul Norris swept the vicinity with his keen eyes, not yet quite convinced that this

strange encounter was not part and parcel of a cunning scheme to entrap him beyond all escape. But he could detect naught suspicious, could see no human being save Uncle Billy and his unresisting burden.

He drew a long breath of relief as Major Wilcox was dragged into the shadow, for now his wild fears were fading away and he began to fancy that Satan was once more favoring his own!

Signing Uncle Billy to stand aside, yet where he could keep him covered without running any risk of a treacherous assault himself, Paul Norris knelt beside the old gentleman, quickly examining him, sufficient to convince himself that the major was still alive. As to what had brought on that strange attack, he could only guess from the bandage which encircled his head.

"You must have hit him a sounder, Uncle Billy!" rising to his feet, with a low, mocking laugh, once more gazing around them. "It's odds he never wakes up to tell how it felt, but—shall I help you out of the scrape, my fine fellow?"

"Ef you'll let me make a break, boss, I'll back my feet fer to help me out—out so fur Tip-Top 'll never more know any Uncle Billy!"

"I'm afraid you'd run your neck into a noose first thing, dear fellow," laughed Norris, putting up his pistol with the air of a man who has fully decided on the proper course to pursue. "We'll see if we can't hide the awful evidence of your bideous crime, Uncle Billy!"

"The good Lawd knows—"

"And I know that unless you come right up to the rack, Uncle Billy, I'll have the mob howling at your heels in just ten minutes by the watch! Button up, and help me lift this gent on his pins."

Uncle Billy obeyed, abandoning his last hope for the present. Yet even then he was inwardly vowing to have full and bitter revenge for all this insult and abuse.

"Just one word more, my friend, before we set sail. This is a particular friend of ours. He's been hitting the bottle heap harder than he'd ought, but it's his birthday, you know, and if a man can't get full once a year, what's the use of living? So our friend reasoned. He got full to running over. Now you and I are taking him home, or to a snug spot where he can sleep it off—see?"

"Ef you say I do, boss."

"Consider it said, then. Steady, now! We'll have to carry him, I reckon, but he's not a very heavy weight, good luck! Get under his arm and trace his back with a hand—so!"

Illustrating his meaning by his own actions, Paul Norris nodded his approval as Uncle Billy followed orders. And then, keeping in the deepest shadows where the fraud would be less liable to detection in case they were to meet any person by the way, Paul Norris directed their course toward the Sanctuary, intending to claim the aid already half secured, though at the moment he had quite a different "boarder" in his mind's eye.

Fortuna still seemed to favor that audacious plotter, for not a single person did they meet during their tramp, and Paul Norris gave a deep sigh of relief as he finally came to a pause not far from the rear of Deacon Jones's saloon.

"It's pretty lonesome 'round this quarter, after dark, Uncle Billy, and I reckon we can drop our boozy pard right here as well as to lug him him further. If he should croak, maybe they'll lay it to some of the local thugs, and that'll let you out. If—if, mind you!" with vicious intensity in his voice as he gripped the bummer by an arm, gazing steadily into his eyes. "If I don't have to swear it all on your head, through your own reckless way of chattering!"

"Hope may die ef I whimper a word, boss!"

"So much the better for your own health, then," resuming his ordinary tone and slipping a few yellow coins into the dirty paw of the ragged rascal. "That's only an earnest of what is in store, if you continue to serve me as well in the future, Uncle Billy. Don't try to run away from Tip-Top, at least until after we've had our little talk on the morrow. If you do, I'll have to hunt you up. And when I go man-hunting, I can't take too many along to tote the rope and do the rough hauling—sabe?"

"Ef you could see how I'm outdin' the ager, boss, you wouldn't need fer to ax?" groaned Uncle Billy, wiping his brow with a shaking hand. "Kin I go now?"

"Yes. And see that you do go, my man! If I catch you prowling in the dark, I might shoot you for some other person."

Uncle Billy shambled away through the night at a pace that gave precious little indications of a wish or thought of eavesdropping, but Paul Norris was not in a mood for running any unnecessary risks, and he silently dogged the rascal to a safe distance before feeling fully assured such an attempt would not be made.

"He's too bad scared to think of watching, I reckon," was the decision as he turned once more toward the Sanctuary. "Now if I can get a word with Deacon Jones—"

The sentence was left incomplete. He found the still insensible major lying where left, then

passed around to the front of the building containing the saloon. A glance within brought a dark frown to his face, for if business had been slack during the early hours, it was rushing just at present.

Drawing back a pace or two from the door, Paul Norris penciled a few words on the back of a business card, then entered the saloon.

Busy though he was, Deacon Jones instantly noticed the new-comer, and gave a slight nod in answer to the meaning glance sent across the room. And seeing that his purpose was at least half read, Paul Norris slipped that card back into his pocket.

Deacon Jones spoke a few words to one of the regular *habitués*, then passed from behind his bar to follow Norris as the latter worthy retreated from the saloon, his peculiar actions noted by no other eyes.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Norris?" asked the Deacon, as soon as they were fairly clear of the door. "I thought as much, and put a man on duty, in case you wanted more than a word."

"Can I have all I want, Deacon?" hesitated Norris.

"By paying for it," was the business-like response. "I'm after the ducats, and if I can collar any while serving a friend at the same time, so much the better for us both."

"And you're ready to take in that boarder I spoke about?"

"Just as soon as we can agree on the terms, Paul."

"You can figure that out and take the first installment out of this," banding the fellow a number of gold coins. "But you understand? My friend wants perfect quiet. Nobody must intrude upon him, unless I am along to vouch for them."

"I'll keep him quiet as the grave," slipping the money into his pocket, after making a mental note of the amount. "In a grave, if you're willing to raise the rent high enough!"

Norris made no reply to this plain hint, but led the way at once to the spot where he had left Major Wilcox, uttering a startled curse, as he saw the old gentleman sitting up, clasping his head with his hands, though showing no signs of bearing their approach.

Norris tore the white apron from about the Deacon's person, deftly casting it over the head and twisting it tightly about the neck of his victim, muttering:

"Where is this den of yours, pard? No time to lose!"

"Take his head, and I'll manage his feet. Just a few steps. No risk of being overheard so long as the boys keep up that racket."

While speaking thus, Deacon Jones caught the major by the feet and Norris supported his body, at the same time keeping that cover over his face. Together they bore the unfortunate gentleman in at the rear of the long building, the front half of which was occupied by the saloon.

"Keep his jaws sealed, pard, while I strike a light," muttered the Deacon, in a disguised voice that proved his instinctive caution. "I'll mighty soon show you his sleeping apartment, and I reckon you'll just howl with envy when you come to sum it all up, too!"

Striking a match Deacon Jones lit a small oil lamp, then lifted a snugly-fitting trap door in the floor, revealing a short, narrow flight of steps leading to an underground recess or cellar.

First taking the lamp below, he returned and helped lower the helpless soldier through the opening, then along a narrow passage, through another door, into a damp, bare cellar.

"I'll fetch him in some fresh bedclothes, if you say so, pard," the gaunt villain chuckled, holding the lamp so as to light the cheerless den. "Shall I bring a shroud along with 'em, pard?"

CHAPTER XXV.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

MAJOR WILCOX struggled to a sitting posture, tearing the white apron from about his head and shoulders, catching his breath and casting indignant glances from one man to the other.

Not that his newly regained eyesight availed him much, for both Paul Norris and Deacon Jones took prompt action against it. The former slouched his hat quickly, folding a handkerchief over his face, leaving only his shadowed eyes uncovered, while the saloonkeeper turned his light low, then made use of the angrily discarded apron after much the same fashion as that set by his employer.

"What outrage is this?" demanded the major, perplexity mingling with the anger awakened by a sense of being maltreated. "Who are you? How came I here?"

Instead of replying in words to these very natural questions, Paul Norris sprung upon the old man, clapping a hand over his lips to stifle an outcry, which might prove dangerous by bringing investigation that way from the crowded saloon. With his other hand he forced the weakened soldier flat on his back, holding him helpless by the aid of one knee sinking into his stomach, harshly saying:

"Get something to tie the old fool, pardner! A gag won't come amiss, I reckon. Lively!"

Deacon Jones was prompt enough to respond, and in a very brief space the old gentleman was rendered completely helpless, though his open eyes flashed defiance back to his captors.

"That's the worst we mean you, stranger, if you act half-way docile about it," said Paul Norris, his tones purposely thick and harsh as he bent over his victim, though taking care to keep even his eyes in the shadows. "We haven't a thing against your life. All we want is a fair grab at your boddle, and if you agree to line our pockets right smart, you'll never be a bit the worse for this little racket."

Major Wilcox strove to free himself, but the effort was worse than useless. Not only were the thongs too strong and too thoroughly applied, but the strain thus undergone sent the hot blood in a rush to his brain, and once again did that awful dizzy, suffocating sensation overpower him.

There came a husky, rattling sound in his throat, similar to that which so frightened Paul Norris not many minutes earlier in the night. There was a convulsive shiver, then he lay like one already overtaken by death.

"What sort o' critter is it you've picked up, anyway, pardner?" exclaimed the Deacon, staring in curiously blended amazement and suspicion as Norris dropped to his knees by the soldier's side. "Is he a genuine croaker, or is it a little game of roots?"

Norris satisfied himself that it was not death, and as Major Wilcox had so recently revived from one such attack, he hardly doubted his rallying from this, in due course of time.

"He's all right, or will be in a little," was his response as he rose to his feet and moved toward the heavy door. "Come on. Surely you can find a more comfortable spot for talking than this hole? Ugh!" with a shiver, summing it all up in a glance. "It smells and feels like a grave!"

Deacon Jones laughed softly, picking up the lamp and opening the door, following Norris after the latter stepped into the first cellar. He closed the door, fastening it by means of a stout bar, resting in heavy iron sockets, holding the lamp so that his employer could satisfy himself as to the means of security.

"Take a look, pardner, and if you think it would add to his safety, I'll wait for you to put your private seal on the treasure!"

"That's all right, Deacon," was the impatient response. "He'd be just as dangerous to you as to me in case he broke away, so I'm not suspicious. Now—where can we have a little confab?"

"In my roosting place," nodded the saloon keeper.

He led the way up the narrow flight of steps, closing the trap-door after Paul Norris emerged, then covering the closely-fitting square with a lot of discarded clothes.

This done, and the narrow door fastened which led to the outer air, Deacon Jones led the way into a second room at the rear of the saloon. This was larger than the first, containing a cot bed, a couple of chairs, with the ordinary furnishing of a bachelor's bedchamber.

"Double walls, deadened," chuckled the Deacon, noting the air of surprise which Norris betrayed at the abrupt cessation of noise from the direction of the saloon. "You can sing your little song in any pitch that suits you best, Paul, and never have a note escape these four walls."

Norris was inspecting the room and noting its details, his gaze finally resting on a door which, he felt confident, could not lead into the saloon proper.

"That is my private entrance," nodded the Deacon. "I intended to mention it before you left, as you may not always care to call on me at the bar; for instance, when you come to pay the board of your invalid friend! Then—by a simple touch, which I'll explain more fully after you've explained the nature of the disease which bothers your interesting boarder, you can summon me to admit you here, at any time."

"Wonderful!" murmured Norris, arching his brows in mock amazement as he added: "To think how far-sighted you were when you took all these precautions expressly for me and my wants! I can scarcely comprehend it, even though you do assure me!"

Deacon Jones frowned slightly, but his tones were even as he said:

"That's all right, Mr. Norris. You have your secrets, and I have mine. I don't ask you to tell me anything more than you care to let drop. All I know is that you've paid me for one week's rent. Whether that sum includes care and attendance, partly depends on what more you may have to say."

"You're too touchy by half, Deacon," laughed Norris, stretching his limbs for a moment, then suddenly growing earnest, closely watching the face of his companion as he asked: "How much of earnest was there in your question about bringing my friend a shroud, Deacon?"

"The biggest part bluff, of course," was the instant response. "I fancied you wanted to frighten the gentleman, and so—sabe?"

"I know what you say: I wish I knew just what you mean," frowned Norris. "You're harder to corner than a cat!"

"I never saw a cat yet that liked to be patted with a club! Call me pet names if you really want to hear me purr, pardner."

Despite his annoyance, Norris was forced to smile at this deft adaptation, and in much better humor he squared himself before the man whom he hoped to win over as a discreet ally.

"You're right, Deacon," he said, with charming candor. "Trust for trust, and I'll lay the first pattern! About this fellow down below: if we pinch him properly, he'll lay a whole nestful of golden eggs!"

"For you, of course?"

"Naturally, since I was the one to find out how much he was worth. And that isn't all, either. Even if I were to tell you the whole secret, you couldn't touch one of those eggs, play your prettiest."

"Then where do I come in?"

"By way of my pocket, of course," with a short, forced laugh. "You name your price for the work I want done, and if it isn't too utterly unreasonable, I'll pay down on the nail."

"A hog couldn't ask better terms," nodded the Deacon. "Would you mind giving a hint as to how far this work of yours is likely to lead a fellow? There is a danger line, you ought to bear in mind."

"And heap bigger wages to be picked up on the furthest side of that same line, mind you, Deacon."

"I'm not denying it, Norris. But money isn't everything. Not that I'm easily scared. All I want is to see the path clear ahead."

"Say I wish that fellow really fitted for a shroud? How much would you ask to do the work?"

Plain talk, sure enough! But Deacon Jones never flinched. For one so cautious about keeping on the safe side of the danger line, he showed remarkable nerve, one would think.

"I never do that sort of a job for less than five hundred," he quietly said, calmly watching what effect his words might have on his companion.

There was no immediate reply. Paul Norris gave a little start, and his countenance changed, but it surely could not have been from horror at the size of the wage mentioned. And with downcast eyes, pulling at his lip with thumb and forefinger for a few moments, he seemed deep buried in thought.

"I can trust you, Deacon?" he finally asked, lifting his eyes to that gaunt, gray face, trying to read what might lie below the surface.

"Just as long as you pay me my price," was the blunt response. "I'm growing old. I've got no boys to look after me when I'm past hard work. I've got a few ducats stored away, but not enough to insure me an easy life for the remainder of my years. I'm out for the money now, and I'll do whatever work you are willing to pay for."

"That sounds more like it! Now—listen, Deacon. Swear that you will hold this fellow snug, no matter what sort of racket may be kicked up by his friends over his disappearance, and I'll pay you double the amount you ask. Then, if it should come to putting him into a shroud, I'll pay you just as much more. How does that strike you?"

"As mighty liberal, and here's my hand on it!" said Jones, extending the member named, firmly gripping the fingers of the schemer.

"But supposing the old rascal should offer you more to turn against me?" Norris asked, with a forced smile.

"Then I'd ask for time to think it over. I'd look you up and see what you thought about coming to meet his figures," was the cool response, without a blush of shame at the frank admission.

Norris flushed hotly, then turned pale as a corpse. Already he was beginning to repent his haste in placing himself in the power of this cold-blooded extortioner, but he had sense enough left to see that any angry outburst on his part would only make matters still worse.

"All right, Deacon, I'll hold you to that agreement. But first make sure the old rascal isn't giving you pure wind!"

"That of course," with a grim nod. "I'm too old a bird to be caught with chaff. And—it oughtn't to be so hard a matter to get at his true responsibility."

Paul Norris gave a start, an uneasy light leaping into his eyes.

"What do you mean by that? What can you know of the man?"

"Nothing more than you have told me, which is precious little," smiled the saloonkeeper. "But if I wanted to know more, what's the matter with pumping Dandy Andy, as they call the fellow?"

Deacon Jones laughed softly as though highly amused by the only too evident chagrin and fear blending in that handsome face.

"Not, mind you," he quietly added, before Norris could recover sufficiently to command his organs of speech, "that I think there is any danger of my having to go to all that trouble. You've set the figures pretty high, and the old fellow will hardly top them before you've made up your mind to either set him free or plant him too deep for ever bidding out loud. I wouldn't have mentioned it at all, only it always did

make me tired to see a smart fellow trying to rub dust into the eyes of another keen one. All the more when I'm playing a straight game with him, mind you!"

"What do you know—that fellow—who is Dandy Andy?" stammered Norris, partially raling from that unexpected blow.

"Of course you don't know him; why should you?" laughed the Deacon, lightly. "Detectives don't bother you. Lucky, in this case, for I'd rather turn into bed with a dozen rattlers for company than to have the Diamond Detective on my track—for cause!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLANNING A SURPRISE-PARTY.

PAUL NORRIS did some swift thinking during the next few moments.

He saw that Deacon Jones knew far more than he had given him credit for, and he began to realize that he would be foolish in the extreme to show his own distrust by striving to maintain the mask, now he knew it had been penetrated. So, making a virtue of necessity, he spoke more frankly:

"I didn't care to fill your hands too full, Deacon, until I saw how you managed the first job, but since you seem to know all about it, I'll own up that dandified scoundrel does give me no little uneasiness."

"Then why not get shut of him?"

Paul Norris frowned darkly before replying:

"If you knew the fellow as well as you seem to infer, you can answer that question for yourself. He's a mighty tough nut, even if he is among the smallest of the crop."

"But he can be cracked, just the same."

"Will you play hammer?" swiftly asked Norris, his eyes glittering.

"I might even do that, if the nut was bothering me!" grimly said the Deacon. "But I think you are the party he feels the closest interest in, just at present."

"For what reason?"

Deacon Jones gave a short nod in the direction of the inner cellar before replying.

"I never set eyes on the gent before, to my knowledge, but I recognized him through the common talk of to-night. He's the old fellow Dandy Andy saved from pitching over the Flume, isn't he?"

The question was not answered, Norris bowing his head and slowly rubbing his heated brows with a hand that, despite his efforts to the contrary, visibly trembled. He seemed buried in thought, but if such was the case, those reflections were devoted to cursing his haste in placing such a dangerous weapon in such unscrupulous hands.

Instead of finding a blind, unquestioning tool, he had gained a master.

"Of course it isn't anything to me, Norris," added Deacon Jones, with a careless yawn. "The notion just struck me, and out it came. Only if I am kept in the dark, you can't blame me so mighty much if I trip over a snag or something of that sort."

"I was thinking—look here, Deacon!" lifting his head and gazing intently into those enigmatical eyes as he added in low, intense tones: "How much will you take to put that devil under the sod?"

"Not a red cent!" was the cold response.

"You mean—"

A private citizen is one thing and an officer of the law is another, you want to bear in mind, dear fellow. The one can disappear, and only his friends take the trouble to ask what had happened. With a man like the Diamond Detective it is entirely different. Not only his friends, but all of his breed take up the case. You'd ought to know what that means. So—not a red, if you please!"

"I'll give you more—"

"It's against my rule, I tell you, pardner."

Paul Norris was silenced for a time. Deacon Jones seemed to take a lazy pleasure in watching his evident discomfiture, but after a short pause he spoke again:

"Of course my rule don't bind everybody, though, and if you would feel any easier at mind with a clear field for a few days, maybe I can scare up a fellow who'll agree to lay the Dandy up a spell."

"To kill him, do you mean?"

"I won't go quite that far, but I wouldn't wonder greatly if that was the outcome," laughing softly. "Of course a good deal depends on the price you are willing to pay."

"Anything in reason—just so that blood-bound is muzzled for a few days; say for one week longer!" eagerly cried Norris.

"Will a hundred be too long a figure?"

"Show me the man—and I'll pay it too quick!"

"All right," with a satisfied chuckle that yet failed to move an outward muscle of that solemn countenance. "I'll hire him for fifty, and keep the other half as my commission. You don't mind facing the fellow, I suppose?"

"I want to see what he looks like, of course. Still, I'd rather he believed the whole affair belongs to you."

"I'm willing, and we'll let that set you easy about my biting you for double the cost of a sound thumping," nodded Deacon Jones, rising

and slipping one hand behind the small looking-glass that hung on the wall.

He pulled a wire hidden there, then swung the glass to one side, revealing the mouth of a speaking tube, plugged with a tight-rolled rag. Extracting this, he placed his lips to the tube, but Paul Norris could not distinguish the words he uttered.

"He'll be around in a minute," explained Jones, returning to his seat. "I told him to put a trusty fellow in his place behind the bar, as I wanted to see him in here on business."

"Don't tell him too much," nervously muttered Norris, shifting uneasily on his seat.

"You shall hear every word, and judge for yourself, pardner," nodded Jones, reassuringly. "He's true blue, and even if the sport should get the best of him—which I'm open to believe he won't!—Pete will never let on that it wasn't a pie of his own baking."

Despite this confident assertion, Norris was ill at ease. With the single exception of his so unexpectedly getting Major Wilcox into his power, everything seemed to be working crossways with him that night.

Even his adroit trapping of Uncle Billy was but a negative triumph, since it simply gave him a counter-hold on that disreputable rascal; one, too, that owed much of its force to the sudden surprise. Now that he had granted the tramp a reprieve, would that frail hold prove effectual in chaining his limber tongue? What if he, too, had recognized Major Wilcox as the passenger of that thrilling trip down the Flume? What if he was to seek out Dandy Andy and tell him all?

Ugly reflections, to be sure! And they were growing darker and darker when the troubled plotter was roused by the sound of a peculiar tapping at the outer door.

Deacon Jones crossed the room and opened the door, stepping back a pace to admit the caller, saying:

"Come in, McCarn. Take a seat and make yourself miserable."

The fellow nodded slightly to Norris, who was regarding him with poorly-concealed interest.

Tall, broad-shouldered, muscular in the extreme, yet moving with a freedom and lightness such as few men of his extreme size and weight can boast, the fellow gave all the evidence of being a hard man to down in any sort of desperate fight. And the more he looked, the more confidence Norris began to place in the shrewdness of his ally.

"A friend of mine, Pete," easily said the Deacon, returning to his chair. "He'll not be in the way at all."

"Ef you're satisfied, boss, I ain't doin' no kickin'."

"On that point I'm satisfied, heap better than on anot'er, worse luck! Pete, you're a tough man, and I've heard you say more than once that you'd rather fight than eat when hungry. Is that so?"

"Waal, melbbe not quite that bad," with a sheepish grin on his heavily bearded face. "As fer tough—I never was cracked, yit."

"Not since I first made your acquaintance at any rate. Well, there is a fellow hanging around here that has stepped on my toes more than once. I wonder if you wouldn't slug him for me?"

"Is it anybody I know, boss?"

"What would you slug him for, McCarn?"

"How hard?"

"Well, say enough to lay him up in lavender for a week or ten days. Mind, old fellow, it's only the thumping I'm asking you to set a figure on. I'll look after all the rest. If you're pulled for the row, I'll pay your fine and see that you don't suffer."

"Jest a thumpin', then?" mused the thug, craftily watching that gaunt visage, plainly suspecting what lay behind it.

"Just that, though you needn't let up until he calls enough. I'll never prosecute you if he don't get over it, be sure!"

"Will a week free o' the bar be too much, boss?"

"I'll promise that much, and give you fifty cases besides, Peter."

"He must be a mighty tough 'un!" ejaculated the thug, in surprise.

"They call him Dandy Andy; just a runt of a fellow, Peter."

"They do say he's lightnin' on the draw, but—fifty cases?"

Paul Norris quickly passed the amount to Jones under cover of the little table, and the Deacon counted them out to McCarn, who cried:

"Good as wheat, boss! He's my meat, an' I'll pound it tender afore the sun gits hot in the mornin'!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

SEARCHING FOR A CLEW.

WHEN Dandy Andy made that discovery, finding the chamber empty and Major Marion Wilcox gone, his first thought was that the old gentleman had called in vain upon him for aid, then sought assistance elsewhere.

Only pausing long enough to make sure the chamber was indeed empty, and that it bore no positive signs of foul play, Griffin hastened down-stairs in search of his employer.

He found that, according to custom after the turn of night, the door by which the street could be gained without entering the office, was closed and locked. He entered the office where the night clerk was on duty, and hurriedly sought information.

The clerk at once declared that Major Wilcox had not left the house since his coming on watch. That he had asked the landlord how the old gentleman was prospering, feeling a natural interest in his case after having heard of that thrilling ride down the Flume. The landlord said all right, he reckoned, since no word or alarm had come from the gentleman or his room.

With steadily-growing alarm, Dandy Andy had the landlord himself roused from bed, only to receive the same answer. Since Major Wilcox was taken to his chamber, he had not been seen afoot. If he had left the hotel, he must have crept out at the private door, and very cautiously at that, before the usual hour for securing that passageway.

Still reluctant to raise anything like a hue and cry, knowing how sensitive the major was on all such subjects, Dandy Andy went back to the deserted chamber, carrying a light, making a keen, thorough examination before taking any more positive step.

There was nothing to tell of a struggle, such as might be expected in case of a kidnapping outrage. There were no signs of violence having been offered. The bed was in disorder, but not remarkably so.

"Looks like he'd gone out for a walk!" ventured the landlord, calling attention to the absence of garments.

Dandy Andy had already noticed this, though he had said nothing. He also remarked the absence of the major's hat, and he could reach but the one conclusion: in a spell of delirium, or temporary insanity, no doubt caused by that severe hurt on his head, the old gentleman had risen, clothed himself and passed down-stairs, leaving the hotel by the private entrance some time before the midnight hour.

"A little better, but not much!" he muttered to himself as, after bidding the landlord keep the affair quiet until he came back, he left the hotel and began a systematic search of the town. "If he don't drop in a fit and die there, mayn't he run into the arms of the rascal who tried to drop him over the Flume?"

Dandy Andy passed up one street and down another, searching the whole town through on this plan, but without finding aught of his employer. He beat the neighborhood of Jasper Clare's residence carefully, though he did not believe the major could possibly have learned where lived the man whom he so strongly suspected. Here, as elsewhere, his search proved useless.

By the time day began to dawn, Griffin felt that he must take more decided steps. He had done all he could to find the missing man without exciting further alarm, but now he dared lose no more time.

"He can't well kick if it does increase his notoriety. I've already strained a point in hopes of saving him that much. Now—the main thing is to find him, no matter how or by whom!"

But that was easier said than done, as the Diamond Detective was fated to realize before the end was reached. He soon had a score of men at work, increased to this figure by volunteers who were interested by the questions asked by the half-dozen whom Dandy Andy really set in motion. Before the sun was well above the rocky range lying to the east, nearly every building in Tip-Top had been visited, and a few of the least reputable ones searched.

Nor was the search confined wholly to the town, as the day grew older, but parties searched further abroad, reasoning that, as the old gentleman was supposed to have wandered into the night while suffering from a hurt on his head, he was quite as apt to make for the hills as to stop in town.

Dandy Andy began to feel more serious doubts, though he permitted nothing of this to betray itself in his face.

Surely, if Major Wilcox had really left the hotel of his own free will, even while suffering from one of those spells with his head, he would have been found long before this?

Yet, it seemed incredible that an enemy could have gained secret admission to his chamber, overpowering and carrying him off without making noise enough to arouse any of the sleepers. Then, too, unless one of the rear windows had been utilized by the kidnappers, they must have done their work while the house was yet astir, since they must have used the private entrance.

Dandy Andy looked for sign in the rear of the building, but he did not waste much time in that quarter. The ground was beaten so hard, the litter was so great, none of which could retain anything like a trail, that almost the first glance showed him the futility of expecting aid from that side.

"No matter how he got out," was his dogged conclusion. "He is out, and somebody is keeping him from coming in. Who? That's the main point, and I'm going to pick it up if it takes a wheel!"

Quite naturally, after the hasty recital given by Major Wilcox before they parted on the night before, Dandy Andy, in trying to bunch all on whom suspicion could possibly rest, included Jasper Clare.

"I can't think it, and yet—"

He frowned darkly as he recalled the manner in which he had met and parted with the Boss of Tip-Top on the night before. Where was he bound, at that hour, in such mad haste? What had so savagely excited him? For surely no wholly sane man would have attempted such brutal usage on such insufficient provocation.

"Could he have already met the major? Or did he meet him after passing me? If so, would he think it necessary to put him out of the way, knowing as he must that hot search would be made?"

With these and kindred thoughts stirring in his brain, Dandy Andy again approached the Clare residence, ringing the bell and politely doffing his tile as Jessamine herself opened the door, looking none the worse for her narrow escape from a watery grave of a few hours previous.

No, Mr. Clare was not at home. Business had called him from town on short notice, the evening before. He did not say when he might be expected home, though he surely could not long remain absent. He had taken no baggage with him.

Promising to call again, Dandy Andy apologized for the trouble he had given, then abandoned that thread for the time being.

"It looks suspicious, but I can't believe it's anything more than looks," he muttered, retracing his steps. "Clare isn't that sort of caliber. He'd make a hot fight, but I don't think he'd stick a man from behind!"

There was yet another man missing, though probably Dandy Andy was the only one among the searchers to give that fact a passing thought.

"I'd sooner think he had a finger in the pie," as his thoughts turned once more toward that missing individual. "A thorough bad egg, if rumor don't lie worse than common. He comes back just in time, too! And then—he's still better reason for fearing the major than Jasper Clare can have!"

From what has been placed before the reader, it will be remembered that the Diamond Detective was engaged on a still-hunt for a certain pair of twins who had been stolen, years before.

He found a clew and he carefully followed it through many crooks and turns, finally bringing up at Tip-Top, feeling morally certain that in the brother and sister locally known as "The Twins of Tip-Top," he had made the longed-for discovery. And until the coming of Major Wilcox's letter, he had never suspected the possible existence in the same town of another and better authenticated claimant.

Recalling all this, it is not so strange that, on learning of the sudden reappearance of "Uncle Billy" Mason, through the casual talk of some of the citizens, he should wonder how much that wanderer knew of the past night's mystery?

"They give him a bad enough name," muttered Dandy Andy, while making his way toward the little bakery. "But has he the grit to tackle such a job on his own hook? Or—curse the crooked luck, anyway! I was a fool for not questioning the major more closely about that long-missing step-son of his!"

The Diamond Detective found Mark Mason at home, looking pale and worried, with an anxious light shifting in his eyes. Something like a frown of anger passed across his face at the coming of the detective, though he had liked him well enough up to the past evening. But Dandy Andy could not afford to be too touchy just now, and greeted the young secretary with his usual easiness, though his own face wore a graver expression than common.

"You've heard about the affair, of course, Mark," he began, adding, without pausing for an answer: "The major came here partly on business matters, as I don't mind admitting to you, in connection with Jasper Clare. I fancied I was pretty well in his confidence, but I'm beginning to think that was a mistake, since—Did Mr. Clare say anything to you about making a hasty trip, last night?"

Mark shook his head positively. He knew of nothing that could have called his employer away so abruptly. Even if he did, he was not sure he could with propriety give the information to a stranger.

A little hurt by that tone and manner, Griffin bowed his thanks and turned away, feeling that he could hope for no information in that quarter.

Nor in any other, as it began to appear. For despite the close and seemingly thorough search being made, not even the faintest clew was as yet picked up. Of one thing Dandy Andy was becoming positive: if within the confines of Tip-Top, Major Wilcox was held a close prisoner if yet living, if dead his body was jealously guarded from discovery.

Among other places searched with more or less thoroughness, the Sanctuary had been visited by some among the volunteer searchers who held a grudge against its proprietor.

Outwardly icy cool, Deacon Jones watched their movements, only his deep-set eyes betraying how keenly he felt the slur upon his character. He bade the men make their search, and then told Pete McCarn to watch each one of the squad to make sure they carried nothing more away than they brought with them.

"It's a dose from the same flask you offer me, gents," he coldly said as they resented his plain talk. "I have full as much cause to think you sneak thieves as you have to suspect me of being a kidnapper. If you don't like the medicine, spit it out."

Whether it was this blunt talk, or whether they did not fancy having that giant thug so close at their heels, the party made but a hasty search, then left for other quarters.

When they were fairly on their way, Deacon Jones broke into a low, ugly laugh, all the more impressive from the fact that it left his face unmoved as though he wore a waxen mask.

"The idiots are giving you the pick of the pack, Peter! You were in charge last night about the hour they say this fellow vanished. It is a distinct slur against your integrity. And— You know the fellow who's at the bottom of the whole racket?"

"My meat, ain't it, boss?" with a grin, his hands doubling up.

"Dandy Andy, no less. Are you going to grin and bear it, Peter?"

"Jest long 'nough fer to find the pesky critter, boss," coolly said the giant, slouching out at the front door.

And within ten minutes he had sighted his game, talking with a small group of men in front of the World Hotel. Without a word McCarn strode forward and with a heavy blow crushed Griffin's hat over his eyes.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER.

WHAT followed was no less a surprise to the startled spectators.

Despite the fact that McCarn's blow had driven the stiff hat far down over his eyes, Dandy Andy leaped forward with a blow straight from the shoulder that could not have been better directed had he had the free use of his eyes. Hit under the chin, the thug was lifted fairly from his feet and landed clear of the walk, the heavy fall driving a good share of the breath out of his body!

Following that leap with another to one side, Dandy Andy tore the battered hat from his face with one hand, the other flashing out a revolver. But as he caught sight of the big fellow sprawling in the gutter, he held his hand to sharply utter:

"Get on your knees, you big loafer, and apologize!"

"Pology be durned!" growled the thug, recklessly scrambling to his feet, though checked from making a rush by the grim muzzle that stared him full in the face. "You don't dast to drap that barker an' trust to the dukes you sling out so nasty!"

"Why should I?" sharply retorted the Diamond Detective. "It would only serve you right were I to bore that bull-skull of yours for—"

"Steady, gentlemen!" came a clear, cold voice, and Cy Near, the city marshal, came striding swiftly to the spot, his own pistol drawn. "I reckon I'm the only man that's got a license for shooting inside the city limits!"

Instantly the little group which had instinctively scattered at that brutal and unexpected assault, flocked back, each one denouncing Peter McCarn as the man alone in fault. And the officer was on the point of placing the thug under arrest, when Dandy Andy interposed.

"Wait a bit, marsbal, please," his tones cool and even, but with a dangerous glitter showing in his eyes as he gently touched his skinned nose with a white 'kerchief. "If I don't put in a complaint, you'll hardly run the fellow in, will you?"

"He wants it, bad enough!"

"Let me ask him first why he spoiled my hat."

"Beca'se some o' your whelps 'sulted me all over!" growled McCarn, following out the line indicated by the Deacon. "Beca'se they tried to make out I'd bin stealin' some durned ole fool or ruther, an' bidin' him in a empty whisky bar'l or a pop bottle or some sech fool place. That's why! An' ef you're one hafe the man you let on to be, you'll come outside the limits an'—"

"Thrash you until you get some sense—I'll do it!" flashed Dandy Andy, then almost pleadingly touching the marsbal on an arm as he added: "Can't you shut your eyes long enough to let us slip out of range, pard? Look at my blessed nose! Think that I'm one of the profession, and so scarred up! Let me lick or be licked, and I'll forget it all before the sun goes down. Refuse—well, I'll drill the big brute through and through on sight!"

"He'll pound you into little bits, stranger!"

"He couldn't well serve me worse than he has my tile, and it's still in the ring," laughed Dandy Andy, cocking the crushed bat over his eye with a truly raking air. "Play it was your

own case, marshal, and try to stretch a wee point."

"Well, if you don't put in a charge, I reckon I don't have to pull the fellow," slowly uttered Near, turning away as he added: "I reckon you'd better take a little walk, Peter, though here's hoping it'll do your health more good than it will your beauty!"

Dandy Andy tapped McCarn on the arm, gently saying:

"You talked a bit ago as though you were well acquainted with the limits of this burg, friend. Will you be so kind as to show me just where that line lies?"

"I'll show you durn sight more'n that, if you ain't skeered to foller a man," growled the thug, moving away from the spot, heading in the direction of Roaring Fork.

"Don't try to run, Peter, whatever else you do," coolly warned the detective, following at his heels. "You took your blow first, with your peepers open. I gave you one, but it was with my peepers shut. If you ever played mumble-the-peg when a boy, you remember the old rule: one with eyes open, two with 'em shut! That leaves me still one behind. Eh?"

"Chin while you kin, fer when I'm through with ye your talkin' gear 'll be all out o' order," grimly laughed the giant, now fully recovered from the shock of that chance blow and consequent fall.

Dandy Andy, satisfied now that the big fellow really meant to give him a fight, lapsed into silence, saying no more until the limits of the town were fairly overpassed.

The news seemed to spread by magic, and by the time Tip-Top was fairly cleared nearly a hundred men were with the party. And among them was Cy Near, the sport-loving city marshal.

"My badge isn't worth a copper now," he coolly uttered, taking a prominent part in what followed.

Dandy Andy was well content to place himself in such good hands, though he paid but careless attention to the warning whispers of the good-natured official.

"He's a slugger, pardner, you want to know. He's never bin laid out in a racket so far, and he's had dozens of 'em!"

"Putting in his nights before and behind the bar," quietly responded the detective, stripping to his undershirt. "I'll put him to sleep inside of ten minutes if he rushes. If he fights shy, in less than half an hour at the outside. My money says so, and if you'll take the trouble to invest it, at evens or any odds that offer, we'll whack up on the winnings."

Cy Near, good judge of men though he claimed to be, looked amazed at such blind confidence as he contrasted the rivals. Though McCarn was too heavy by a good many pounds, he was not what could be called fat for an untrained man, and looked big enough to "eat the little fellow," as more than one of the company bluntly declared.

"Is it to be according to rule, or go as you please?" asked Dandy Andy, when his brief preparations were completed.

"They wasn't nothin' said 'bout no rules," doggedly growled Pete McCarn, his face looking more vicious than ever as he put up his hands. "It was lick or be licked, an'—I'll make ye holler the shortest way!"

The words were still on his lips when he rushed forward, sending out both arms in a half blow, half clutch, thinking to bear his small antagonist to the ground at once, when his great weight must surely tell; but he counted without his host.

With a strength that seemed marvelous in one of his build, Dandy Andy brushed those huge arms aside, then struck the bully a tremendous blow straight from the shoulder as he stepped aside to permit him to pass on. It sounded as though his fist had come in contact with a board, but McCarn was only staggered, ducking as he turned, hoping still to grapple with his adversary.

Swift as thought Dandy Andy swung his right fist in an upper-cut, striking the bully on one eye, lifting his head far enough to expose his face to another straight shot. Like a bolt of lightning that shot fell, driving a bloody spray for several feet around, cutting to the bone below the other eye, knocking the big fellow over on his back.

"Jump him, pard!" cried Cy Near, wholly forgetting the star he wore and the position he filled in his wild excitement at this unexpected triumph on the part of the man he was seconding. "Rough-an-tumble he would have it! Let him git bis fill right now!"

"He spoiled my hat, and I haven't another with me," coldly uttered the Diamond Detective, standing at ease, though watching his adversary so closely. "I reckon it'll hurt the lubber heap worse to give him a scientific thrashing. Anyway, that's what I'm here for."

Blinded, half stunned, Pete McCarn struggled to his feet, too badly shocked to even spit out an oath. And as soon as he was fairly erect, Dandy Andy fell to work, his sinewy arms and steel-like fists raining a terrible succession of blows upon that almost helpless face, varied by an occasional blow upon the body, though as a

rule he avoided this. It was plain to all that, despite the seemingly immense odds against him at the start, Dandy Andy had his man wholly at his mercy, and that he could finish him at will. For, as McCarn grew weaker, his blows also took on less force, though each one left its mark behind.

Then, as though growing disgusted with the ugly sight which now followed every blow, Dandy Andy gathered himself together for an instant, then shot his fists in swift succession full into the pit of McCarn's stomach, sending him in a doubled-up heap to the ground.

"Knocked out, too slick!" shouted Cy Near, sailing his hat high into the air. "And I deserve a licking for doubting he could do it!"

Dandy Andy quietly put on his outer garments, then spoke, sternly:

"That fellow was only a tool. I'll pay fifty dollars for positive information as to the cowardly cur who hired him to slug me!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

DANDY ANDY CORNERS UNCLE BILLY.

AMONG those who heard this liberal offer was Paul Norris, but he showed no signs of accepting the chance, and not another of the entire party seemed so utterly disgusted with the miserable display made by Peter McCarn as did that smooth-faced sport.

Placing no little reliance on the word of Deacon Jones, and in common with many another man that day, considering the odds all against the dandified detective, he had joined the company with an easy confidence that a single brush would suffice to clear his path of that dangerous obstacle, for a time at least.

"The big stiff!" he muttered, in utter disgust as he turned away from that bruised and senseless bulk. "He couldn't whip a dead man!"

Dandy Andy hardly expected to have his offer promptly taken up, though he paused to look keenly around the crowd, hoping to catch a frown or a glance to guide his suspicions aright.

If he failed in this, he saw something else that more than repaid his trouble, and while Cy Near was pouring congratulations into his ear, his eyes were carefully keeping track of—Uncle Billy Mason!

Where he came from, or when he joined that "little picnic," Dandy Andy had no means of knowing. He had never laid eyes on the man before, and only had a general idea of his size, shape and features, yet he never for an instant doubted that the ragged, dirty, frowsy rascal now under his watch was other than the man whom he was particularly anxious to interview, just at the present time.

To make assurance doubly sure, however, he changed his position so that the face of the city marshal was turned toward the tramp, now moving away from the scene of the battle. Those keen eyes quickly recognized the tramp, and in a hasty whisper he conveyed the information to Dandy Andy, knowing that he had set inquiries afloat in that direction.

"Shall I pull him, pardner? It's a leetle out of my jurisdiction, but that don't count. He'll come like a lamb!"

"Not on my account," with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "He's of no use unless the old gentleman is found. Not much, even then, save as a possible witness in a little dispute about a mining claim. But—if you really want to do me a favor, I wish you'd look after that big fellow. See that he has his cuts patched up, and let a doctor say if he needs anything more. Is it too much to ask?"

By this move Dandy Andy not only increased his standing in the estimation of a really valuable friend, but he got rid of one who promised to innocently defeat a very dear wish at the same time.

Uncle Billy, not yet decided to keep his appointment with Paul Norris at the Sanctuary, of whom he had not caught sight until the fistic duel was nearly over, skulked away from the spot, making his slightly unsteady legs carry him in the direction of the bridge over Roaring Fork.

Uncle Billy had not passed the most enjoyable of nights, despite the fact that his pockets were fairly well lined with money. Paul Norris had frightened him dreadfully, and even yet the old fellow could not quite see his way clear to improve the various discoveries he had made since his return to the Tip-Top region.

So badly was he scared by the threats of the plotter that, after aiding Norris bear the old gentleman to the vicinity of the Sanctuary, Uncle Billy skurried away at speed, hardly stopping to catch his breath until at the opposite edge of the town. Nor would he have stopped then, but for remembering that this was the last saloon to be met with on that edge of Tip-Top.

Waiting until satisfied that no one was dogging him, Uncle Billy entered this saloon and secured a couple of bottles of whisky, with which as companions and comfort, both in one, he stumbled along over Roaring Fork, snuggling down in a secluded nook, where he passed the remaining hours of darkness in drinking and trying to think.

He had hardly awakened from a drunken

sleep when he was attracted by the crowd coming toward the bridge for the purpose of witnessing the fight, and curiosity finally drew him along to the outskirts; only to slink away once more as he recognized the face of Paul Norris.

Thus it came about that Uncle Billy really knew nothing of the great commotion raised over the strange disappearance of the old man whom he had helped place in captivity, else he might have exhibited even greater surprise and uneasiness than he did when Dandy Andy suddenly stepped into his covert with:

"Good-morning, Uncle Billy! How's whisky?"

"Goin' down—gittin' mighty low, wuss luck!" with a poor attempt at a grin of welcome, while he was trying to remember when or where he had met this gentleman who greeted him so familiarly.

Dandy Andy read this covert scrutiny aright, and with a bland smile, he answered the unspoken question.

"I don't reckon you've had that pleasure, Uncle Billy, but your family has. In fact I flatten myself I've made quite a favorable impression on Mark. Fine fellow, by the way."

"Then I hain't got no furder use fer you!" growled the tramp, an ugly light leaping into his bleared eyes. "A man as kin crack up the praises o' that ongrateful, onregenit, onrepentin' boy—waal, he ain't the class I want to mix up with, an' the sooner you show me the shape o' your back, stranger, the better I'll like the looks o' your face!"

"A son any father might well be proud of!" added Dandy Andy, as though the tramp had not uttered a word. "And for the life of me I can't imagine how you come so far away from his side. I should think wild horses couldn't tear you apart, after so long an absence. Yet—"

"You git out! He ain't no son o' mine. He never was. He never will be. An' I'll stick to that ontel the crack o' doom."

"How old were the twins when you first stole them from their parents, Bill Mason?" sharply demanded Dandy Andy, his eyes keenly noting every change in that whisky-painted countenance.

Uncle Billy gave a low, choking cry, as he shrunk back with one arm instinctively lifted as a guard for his head. And to one whose suspicions were so well fortified in advance, his every feature expressed conscious guilt.

"Don't jump clear over the fence, Uncle Billy," added Dandy Andy, in smoother tones, though a finger turned back his vest until his golden badge became visible for an instant. "I'm after you, it's true, but not to pull you for keeps; not to pull you at all, unless you try to stir up the mud too obstinately. It's just settling enough so a fellow can begin to spell out the trail."

Uncle Billy opened his lips, but then closed them again without uttering a word. Was it because that sharp challenge had stricken him speechless, or was it nothing more than native cunning, warning him to run no risks of committing himself.

"I'll make it as easy as I know how, Uncle Billy," quietly added Dandy Andy, taking a seat on a convenient rock, motioning the tramp to imitate his action. "I always did hate to push an old man down hill!"

"Yes, I'm old, an' gittin' older in a hurry!" mumbled Uncle Billy, gracefully catching at the opening. "An' now I've got to set to roamin' the wide world once more, fer I've bin kicked out o' house an' home by a stony-hearted son—a boy as I've toiled an' moiled an' worked my ten knuckles to the werry bone fer to keep in luxury!"

"Then you really have a family, Mason?" asked Dandy Andy, in seeming surprise. "You actually have a son who has disowned you?"

"Kicked me out as ef I never cost a red cent, sir! An' me his own nat'ral boru pap! An' me—"

"Lying as fast as your tongue can wag," coolly interposed Dandy Andy. "Try the truth for a change, and tell me how much you were paid for kidnapping Mark and Annie when they were babies, old fellow."

"The—good—Lawd!" gasped Uncle Billy, staring in wide-eyed amazement at the speaker, his dirty paws uplifting by way of emphasis.

"Actually frightful, isn't it?" grimly smiled the detective, crossing his legs and supporting his arms on his knee, a half-contemptuous, half-menacing light burning in his keen eyes. "Yet it's gospel truth, all the same, and the sooner you make up your mind to toe the mark, my fine fellow, the lighter will be your punishment, the beavier your reward."

"But—if I only knowned jest what you was tryin' to git at!"

"You hardly deserve as much, Uncle Billy, but for reasons which I prefer keeping to myself for the present, I'd rather let you down as easy as possible. And so—I'll give you just one more show!"

"You hardly expected to be taken so frankly at your word, when you declared. Mark Mason to be no son of yours, but I've long known it to be a positive fact. He is no son of yours. His twin sister is no daughter of yours. The only possible claim you have on either is the not very

creditable one of having stolen them away from their parents, years ago."

Dandy Andy paused as though expecting a denial, but none such came. Mason seemed literally dumfounded by that blunt accusation, staring into the face of the speaker with widely opened eyes, his lower jaw drooping idiotically the while.

"You were hired to make way with the twins," rapidly resumed the detective. "You covered your tracks well, but money can accomplish almost anything, and after all these years money has led to a discovery of the truth. I've picked up the trail, bit by bit, until I not only know where the kidnapped twins are, but I have proof sufficient to send you for the rest of your life—well, where the dogs can't bite you!"

"Good—Lawd!" gasped Uncle Billy, shrinking back.

"I can and will railroad you into State's Prison, unless you make what poor amends you can, Uncle Billy," in milder tones. "Brace up and try to be something of a man. Tell the whole truth, exposing the rascal who first corrupted you, and instead of prison, reward. There's big money in it, I tell you, man!"

"Fer—for the kids?"

"A round million for them, at the very least. Hundreds for you, if you talk white; a cell if you try to bluff it out. Take your choice."

"A million—Heaven o' love!" muttered the dazed tramp, seeming able only to comprehend that one stupendous fact.

"That much outright, with a certainty of nearly as much more when an old man dies," nodded Dandy Andy. "And when they come to their own, through your testimony, no doubt they will forgive your sins, even if they don't give you a more substantial reward."

"But ef it was so long ago—mebbe I couldn't make it jest so clear an'—"

"All you'll have to do is to tell the simple truth. If you go astray, be sure I'll catch you tripping," was the somewhat impatient interruption as the detective rose from his hard seat, adding: "But I reckon we can talk it over to better advantage in Tip-Top. Will you make the best of it, or shall I give you the collar?"

Still acting like one in a waking dream, or thoroughly dazed, the tramp rose to his feet and shambled along by the side of the Diamond Detective, mumbling over and over to himself that magical sum.

Dandy Andy felt far less triumph than might have been expected. He would have been better satisfied had Uncle Billy shown more vigor in denying the crime laid at his door. Now—was he really on the right trail? Was Mason actually the custodian of the missing heirs, or had that dazzling announcement decided him to attempt an imposture, in hopes of feathering his own nest?

Mental anxiety and loss of sleep had disturbed the natural coolness of wit and shaken the nerves of the detective, but he showed no outward signs of this while returning to Tip-Top in company with Uncle Billy. But scarcely had they entered the town before the latter gave a low ejaculation of terror, and ducking his head, took to his heels!

Dandy Andy instinctively recognized the cause of this, and said:

"What have you got to do with it, Mr. Paul Norris?"

CHAPTER XXX.

A FATEFUL INTERVIEW.

THAT was a weary, trying day to Mark Mason, and it seemed to him as though the evening would never come.

For one thing he was worried by thoughts of his father, feeling sure that they were not fairly rid of him yet. Any or all open demands might be resisted, as they surely would be, but would he act thus? The past afforded scant assurance on that point.

Whatever love might have been given the father, had been forfeited a thousand times over by his own fault. He had robbed and deserted the children when they were too young to care for themselves, and when they must have starved but for the kindness of Sally Bunch. He had twice visited them since, each time to leave them worse off than he found them. And, blackest deed of all! In the long ago his brutal, heartless conduct had hastened the death of his meek and uncomplaining wife—had broken her heart, as Aunt Sally often declared.

Then there were the strange words and actions of Andrew Griffin.

What lay hidden back of them?

Then, again, there was the sudden and unexplained absence of Jasper Clare, to add fresh anxiety to his brain, more, however, on account of Jessamine than for himself.

Take it all in all, there is little room for doubting that this particular day was the most restless, uncomfortable one which Mark Mason had ever experienced.

And he had for a little while dared hope it would prove the dawn of a long, cloudless, blessed era! He had dared hope, even against his better judgment, that before that day passed the turn of night, Jasper Clare would have granted his prayer, blessing the prospective

union of his daughter with his handsome young secretary!

Twice during the day he had called at the Clare mansion, to ascertain if its master had returned from that hasty journey, each time to receive the same answer. And on neither occasion had he seen Jessamine, the housekeeper answering his summons.

Though he knew that a simple request would bring Jessamine to see him, these failures aided in weighting down the heart of the young man, though he never once faltered in his resolve to call, as agreed upon by Jessamine and himself while lingering beside the river in which they had so nearly met their death.

After drawing Sally Bunch apart to whisper a parting warning in her ear, where Annie could not see or hear them, Mark Mason left the little shop and started for the Clare residence. He hardly dared hope that Jasper Clare had returned home, but he knew that Jessamine would receive him. And just then he sorely felt the need of such comfort as she alone could give him.

His pale, sad face lightened as Jessamine answered his ring, even though almost the first words she spoke confirmed his fears that her father was still absent.

After all, perhaps it was just as well. They could be sure of one more blissful evening!

The next two or three hours passed swiftly to the lovers, who had so much to say, so much to listen to. Their love seemed so new, so fresh and so strange, that neither could tire of discussing it. And though an occasional shadow crept over it, whenever they thought or spoke of the father who held their fate in his stern hands, two happier people could not have been found in all Tip-Top, when heavy footsteps were heard and Jasper Clare flung wide the parlor door, stopping short and sternly gazing upon the couple as they instinctively sprung to their feet.

"Father—you have returned!" murmured Jessamine, paling with a dread which seemed faintly duplicated on the face of her lover, though he quickly rallied under that fiery gaze.

"Do I look like a ghost?" grimly retorted the Boss of Tip-Top, nodding shortly to Mark Mason as he added: "Glad you're here, Mason. It saves me a call at your house. Come into my room, will you?"

"Gladly, Mr. Clare," was the reply. "I called expressly to see you, sir, though I began to fear I would not have that pleasure, to-night."

"Don't—wait for a better time, dear!" murmured Jessamine, as her parent turned his back upon them in leading the way from the parlor to his office.

Mark forced a smile, swiftly dropping a kiss on her pale face before leaving the room. But he made no other reply. He had no time, for one thing, and he could not give the promises she asked, for another.

He saw that Jasper Clare divined something of the truth, and as a man he felt it would be cowardly to postpone his confession.

Jasper Clare turned abruptly as Mark entered the office, motioning him to close the door behind him. It was a most unpromising reception, but Mason quietly obeyed, then stood before his employer waiting his pleasure.

His face turned a shade paler as he watched the mining magnate counting out a sum of money, placing it on a corner of the table, all without another glance at the secretary until his wallet was secured and returned to his pocket once more. Then Jasper Clare spoke, coldly, harshly, his eyes glittering with an ugly light.

"There's the amount due you, Mark Mason, together with one month's salary in advance. Will you oblige me by signing a receipt in full?"

"Then I am to understand that you no longer require my services, Mr. Clare?" his voice far from steady as he uttered the words.

"You're to understand that I've discharged you, sir," was the cold retort. "I don't choose to give my reasons, and so I pay you for the privilege of holding my tongue. There's your money. Here's a receipt. Sign it, take the other, and—good night!"

But Mark made no offer to do either. A hot flush was rising in his cheeks, and his eyes were beginning to glow. It was difficult to bear with such rude words and harsher manner, but he had a point to win if possible, and though it seemed worse than hopeless, he was too stubborn to beat a retreat with that plea left unuttered.

"If any other man treated me in this manner, Mr. Clare, I would demand an apology or a sufficient reason for his acting so brutally. To you—"

"Will you take your money and your discharge and go, sir?" frowned Clare, harshly. "Isn't it enough that I want to have nothing more to do with you or any of your tribe? Must I speak still plainer?"

"Mr. Clare, I came here as a gentleman, to ask you, as another gentleman, for your consent to my marriage with your daughter."

"What? you dare? You—the son of that drunken thief and infernal scoundrel, Bill Mason?" hoarsely ejaculated the other, his face flushing until it was fairly purple.

"Am I to be measured by my father, sir?" unsteadily asked the young man, with difficulty

speaking at all, so powerful were his emotions. "Am I ever to suffer through his misdeeds? Am I to abandon all hope?"

"Hope—you?" with a low, mocking laugh that was plainly forced. "You hope to wed with my daughter?"

"I can hardly call it hope, sir, though Jessamine has confessed that she returns my love, and—"

With a long stride Jasper Clare came near enough to draw the back of one hand swiftly across Mark's lips, cutting his words short. And with purpled face, with great veins swelling out into relief on his temples, his voice hoarse and barely audible, Jasper Clare said:

"You lie, you pitiful cur! My child—you? Dare to repeat such a foul slander, and I'll crush you where you stand!"

"You might possibly do that, Mr. Clare, for you are double my size and weight," was the low, calm response, Mark facing the maddened mine-owner without flinching, though twin spots of color burned in his cheek at those repeated insults, capped by a blow. "But if you were twice as mighty, a thousand times my superior, you could not alter the truth nor make me own to a lie which I have never uttered."

"Will you go, you idiot?" gasped Clare, pointing with a trembling hand toward the closed door. "Go—go now, before I wholly lose myself! Go—or I'll murder you!"

"Not until you hear me say once more that even as I love her, Jessamine loves me!" flashed Mark, his own hot temper getting the upper hand, despite his efforts to hold it in check.

The words hardly crossed his lips before Jasper Clare flung himself upon the young man, his muscular fingers meeting around his neck, the impetus of his leap forcing Mark backward to the floor, their fall upsetting the table, breaking and extinguishing the lamp.

The shock half-stunned the young man, doubled as this was by the addition of Jasper Clare's great weight. He tore at the hands which seemed to make their finger-tips meet in his flesh, shutting off all breath, effectually preventing any outcry for mercy or for help!

All was turning to the color of blood before his eyes. He felt as though molten lead was being poured into his brain, down his throat. He struck out blindly with both hands!

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

JESSAMINE CLARE sunk into a chair, covering her face with her hands, all hope gone now that she saw how her father had come home.

Only once or twice before had she seen him when his fierce temper was fully aroused; never against herself; but even when at his worst, his eyes had not looked so dangerous as now.

Passionately as he loved her, and tenderly as he had always treated his daughter, when Jessamine saw that lurid glow in his eyes, her courage failed her and she dared not interfere with a word.

If Mark would only heed her whispered warning! If he would only hold his own fiery spirit in check, meekly bearing with the harsh words which, she felt only too certain, Jasper Clare was about to pour upon his head! Even yet they might win his ultimate consent to their union.

In fear and trembling Jessamine listened, gradually gaining hope as she failed to catch any loud or angry words from the library. But then, just as she was on the point of rising and venturing at least as far as the hall, the dreaded storm burst.

She heard a sharp crash, accompanied by a heavy jarring that seemed to shake the entire building. She heard the loud, angry tones of her father a moment later, then a sharp, strange cry that might well have been the voice of a human being in mortal agony.

For a brief space the poor girl stood like one petrified, unable to move hand or foot, too frightened even to scream. But then she heard the old housekeeper above stairs, her voice scared and uncertain, and the sound seemed to break that horrible spell.

"Father—Mark!" she gasped, springing forward and opening the door, crossing the hall and almost falling from weakness produced by that awful dread.

She reached the door opening into the library, and managed to push it open, recoiling from the utter darkness, out of which came only the sounds of a confused struggle, the horrible gasping, gurgling that so often marks the last struggle of one whose life has been shortened by violence.

"Father—Mark!" the poor girl gasped, kept only from falling by a blind clutching of the door-casing.

Only that sickening sound—as though one of those on whom she called was vainly striving to respond.

From the head of the stairs came the tremulous call of the terrified housekeeper, but if she heard, Jessamine was past heeding. She staggered back to the parlor, detaching the hanging lamp and flying back to the library, lighting up a frightful scene.

"What is it? Who is it, deary?" asked the housekeeper, just in time to catch the lamp as

Jessamine dropped it, springing forward to where those two men lay like one, shrieking wildly as she strove to unfasten those locked fingers from the throat of her lover.

Mrs. Carew took one glance, then fled to the front door, shrieking and sobbing, fairly frightened out of her senses by that horrible sight—by those two blood-dripping corpses as she fairly believed.

The door was violently flung open, and a tall figure sprung across the threshold, sternly demanding:

"What's wrong? How can I help? Is it burglars, or—"

"Murder—the master—in there!" gasped the poor woman, then lifting her shrill voice and sending that awe-inspiring word far away over Tip-Top. "Murder—murder!"

Paul Norris caught the lamp from her hand, lighting himself into the library, uttering a sharp ejaculation as he saw Jessamine kneeling beside those two men, only the uppermost of whom gave any positive signs of life, just then.

"Jessamine—Miss Clare!"

Quickly freeing his hands by placing the lighted lamp on the desk against the wall, Paul Norris picked the senseless maiden up in his strong arms, bearing her to the door, clearing it just in time to avoid being pounced on by half a dozen men who came flocking to the rescue.

"Look to the men in yonder, gentlemen!" he hurriedly cried, making his way toward the parlor with his lifeless burden. "Mark how you find them, before touching anything. There's bitter black work been going on, I'm afraid!"

He placed Jessamine on a couch, pausing only long enough to make sure that she had received no bodily injury, though her light dress was spotted with blood. Then he hastened after Mrs. Carew, who was crying and sobbing, half beside herself, bringing her in from the front yard, sternly bidding her care for her young mistress.

"Calm yourself, I beg of you," he said, earnestly, before leaving them. "Don't make the shock any heavier for the poor child!"

Pale, stern, his eyes glowing vividly Paul Norris made his way to the library, now fairly well filled by citizens who had promptly responded to that wild alarm.

Jasper Clare, frightfully pale, his garments fairly saturated with his own blood flowing from a ghastly knife-wound in his side, lay with his head supported against a friendly knee, panting, gasping, yet evidently in possession of his senses.

Not far from him lay Mark Mason, his limbs contorted, his face distorted and unnaturally dark, even now beginning to painfully gasp for breath.

"He cut me!" panted Jasper Clare, a glow of hatred in his eyes as they turned toward the young man. "Hold him—until I—hang!"

A spasm of acute pain broke his vengeful sentence, and with a shiver his eyes closed, his head dropped.

"He's dying!" harshly uttered Paul Norris, springing forward and clutching Mark Mason by an arm as that barely conscious man tried to struggle to his feet. "Here's his vile murderer! What shall we do with him, men of Tip-Top?"

"Serve him the same way—an' hyar's the knife he cut the boss with!" grated the man whose knee supported the mine-owner, viciously casting the bloody weapon at the accused youth.

More through clumsiness than lack of intent, only the haft struck Mark, but the words and action was enough to set that mad, unreasoning thirst for vengeance to flowing, and for a brief space it seemed as though Mark Mason was doomed to suffer death even before he could be hustled out of that room.

"Do it decently and in order, if you must hang him!" cried Paul Norris, clinging to his captive while both were being pushed along the hall to the front entrance. "Fall back, men! Is there no law and justice to be found in Tip-Top? Are you so afraid the cowardly assassin will cheat the rope, that you can't even wait to see if the boss will die of his hurts?"

Whether it was so intended or not, this appeal had some effect in checking that mad rush, and Paul Norris was comparatively free from the excited group as he emerged from the hall into the outer air. The sudden transition from light to gloom for a little space seemed to blind him, though he clung tenaciously to the accused, now recovering sufficiently from that terrible choking to "feel" his own feet.

Then—swift as thought the whole scene was changed!

Something struck Paul Norris on one jaw, hurling him endlong back into the crowded doorway, breaking his grip on the accused. In his fall he tripped up more than one of the citizens, causing a wild uproar, the confused, maddened fellows cursing and striking at random.

Only a fist; but that of a man who knew right well how to put the convenient article to the best use!

Drawn to the front by that wild outcry, Dandy Andy beheld the peril threatening Mark Mason, and without stopping to inquire into the merits of the case, he promptly knocked Paul Norris endlong, catching the bewildered, half-uncon-

scious young man by an arm and dragging him hastily around the corner out of sight, before any one of the crowd could detect his presence or his purpose.

Here poor Mark staggered and would have fallen in a heap, had not Dandy Andy deftly swung him across his shoulders, bending low under his burden, but making remarkably good time, for all that.

Dandy Andy ran around to the rear of the house, keeping as much as possible in the denser shadows, for already Paul Norris was on his feet and savagely urging his mates on to recapture the fleeing assassin.

Dropping his burden under a clump of shrubbery, Dandy Andy darted to the stable, in front of which a still saddled horse was hitched, just as Jasper Clare had left it on returning from his mysterious trip.

With a sharp jerk, the horse was set free, then sent away at a wild gallop from a fierce cut over the haunches, clattering down the road at top speed, while Paul Norris wildly urged his men after the supposed fugitive, himself leading the chase.

"Let me know how you feel when you see the trick!" laughed Griffin, as he returned to his unfortunate young friend.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A BRIDE FOR VENGEANCE.

"How are you feeling now, dear friend?" softly asked Paul Norris, drawing a chair silently to the side of the bed on which Jasper Clare was resting.

"What news?" eagerly demanded the wounded man, a faint flush leaving into his face, looking as though he had suffered long weeks of debilitating illness, though it was only mid-forenoon of the day succeeding that sad affray in the library.

He had been cared for as well as the best medical aid in Tip-Top could serve, though the physicians seemed reluctant to express a decided opinion as to the extent of his wound. This very reticence told how serious they deemed it, as did their repeated warnings against permitting him to bear or see aught that could add to his febrile excitement.

But Jasper Clare had always possessed a will of his own, and low as that knife-thrust had brought him, he would not be denied now. He sent word for Paul Norris to visit him, and that gentleman promptly obeyed.

"Are you strong enough to hear the news, dear sir?" softly said Norris, closely scrutinizing the injured man. "I fear you ought not to run the risk. Remember how—"

"I remember how I was foully cut by that scoundrel," flashed Jasper Clare, his eyes glowing dangerously. "Don't tell me he's got clear off, or it will hurt me!"

"He is safe enough, so far as running away is concerned, but—"

"You've got him, then?"

"Well, he's under the wing of Cy Near, your city marshal, but how long he'll stay there is not so easy to say," grimly replied Norris, a curious expression in his face.

"If Near knows—he's been charged with assault?"

"Charged, but it missed fire," with a short, hard laugh.

Jasper Clare closed his eyes with a faint groan. This suspense was far more trying than the bluntest speech. Paul Norris was keen enough to realize as much, and his manner instantly changed.

"I was afraid to tell you all, dear sir, for your physicians warned us to keep all exciting causes far from your bedside. But I'm doctor enough to know that plain talk won't harm you as much as brooding in doubt, so I'll tell you all I've discovered."

"Thank heaven for that much, anyway," muttered the wounded man, with a fleeting smile that pointed his words.

"You know that the fellow made a break and got away from us in the confusion last night. The doctor told me that was your first question when you recovered your consciousness."

"Naturally, too," with a stifled groan of pain. "Go on—skip that—tell the rest."

"I got an ugly crack on the point of the jaw in the skirmish, and that mixed my wits up just enough to tumble me headlong into the neat trap sprung by that infernally cool rascal, Dandy Andy, as they call him. He started your horse off, full split, and we followed the racket."

"When that left him a clear road, Dandy Andy helped Mason to Cy Near's house, and then on a trumped-up charge, as I verily believe, he claimed that he had arrested the young fellow."

"How—what sort of charge?"

"A charge of forgery, or something of the sort. The marshal says it is regular, and that he can't prevent Griffin from taking Mason back to Kansas to stand trial, if the villain so elects."

Jasper Clare broke forth into a storm of oaths, cut short by a groan, wrung from his lips by his wound.

"If I was only afoot! If I could even go on crutches!" he groaned in savage impotence. "I'd tear the young whelp away from a thou-

sand Dandy Andys, and crush the miserable breath out of his carcass!"

"I thought of that, too," nodded Norris, frowning darkly, pinching his pendulous lip with thumb and finger. "It was clear day before we smoked that neat trick, but even then the boys were hot enough to lynch the rascal on your account, but Cy Near helped to bluff them off. He swore that he would defend the prisoner with his life, saying that Griffin had papers which he was bound to respect. It's all a blank fraud, of course, but what can we do?"

Jasper Clare made no answer. His fierce passions had weakened him not a little, and seemed to increase the fever of his wound. Paul Norris looked uneasy and troubled as he keenly watched that ghastly pale face. Had he said too much? Would this excitement end fatally?

The door gently opened, and as Norris turned his face, he recognized the housekeeper, Mrs. Carew. He rose softly, crossing over to the door, whispering:

"How is she—Miss Clare?"

"Bad enough, poor child!" with an unsteady voice, yet not too badly affected to steal a curious glance at the pale face of her master, giving a short gasp of mingled fear and pleasure as his lids raised and he faintly bade her enter.

"Jess—why don't she come?" he asked.

Norris quickly interposed before Mrs. Carew could speak.

"She is lying down now, sleeping. She was with you nearly all the night, though you failed to recognize her, dear sir."

"Tell her not to worry over me," with an increase of strength as that sickening pain grew less. "I'm all right. I'll dance at her wedding in spite of that cowardly villain!"

Norris gently pushed Mrs. Carew out of the room, following after to learn more as to Jessamine. There was not much to tell. The poor girl seemed fairly benumbed by that frightful vision, and was now lying in what might pass for slumber.

"But I doubt if she ever gets over it, if her pa should die!" sobbed Mrs. Carew.

"You heard what he said, just now? Well, I believe he will prove just as good as his word. Now—please return to your young mistress. I will watch over Mr. Clare for a time, at least. If any change for the worse should come, you shall have ample warning."

Paul Norris noted a change the instant he re-entered the chamber, but it was one for the better. Instead of injuring him, this strong emotion actually seemed to be helping the wounded man!

"Unless it brings on a relapse," inwardly decided Norris. "Well, if I can work him up to the right pitch, and pin him there until I can secure my point, it's little grief I'll waste if he should croak!"

There was nothing of this selfish brutality visible in the face or eyes of the prime schemer on his return to the bedside of the mine-owner. He was playing one of his most important cards in the evil game over which he had studied so long and intently. He feared defeat, now that the critical moment was so near at hand, but he could not delay it much longer.

"You are strong enough to listen yet a little longer, dear sir?" he softly said, touching the muscular wrist with the tips of his cool fingers, noting the steady if rapid bounding of the pulse.

"If there's anything better to tell," grimly responded Clare. "If it's all bad news, put it on ice until I'm cooler headed than now!"

"I fear it's all bad enough, but at least it will prove to you that you have one solid friend who tries to keep the grass from growing under his feet."

"Meaning yourself?" with something not far akin to a sneer.

Norris bowed assent, flushing slightly as he read that look aight.

"I hunted up old Nubbs, the lawyer. I told him how the case stood, and paid him to call on the marshal and learn if anything could be done. He did so, and reported complete failure. Says that while we were on a wild-goose chase, Dandy Andy was at work; that he has already sent in an application for requisition papers, and a lot of legal lingo of the same purport. I didn't even pretend to comprehend just what he meant, but Nubbs declined a liberal fee to take up the case, so there must be something in it."

"If I could stir a peg, all the papers in existence couldn't keep my fingers from his throat!" grated Clare, viciously. "And if I ever get my clutch on him again—Curse his knife!" with a groan of pain. "Only for that, I'd have finished him off-hand!"

Paul Norris bent his head like one in deep thought for a little space. When he looked up again, his face seemed hard and desperate.

"It could be done, though somebody would be pretty apt to get badly hurt in bringing it off. But—Mr. Clare, can I talk to you frankly?"

"Haven't you been doing so? If not, pitch in. Reckon I'm proof against almost anything, after this!"

"You don't know much about me, save that I came here in hopes of investing a goodly

amount of money. In coming to you, I was guided solely by information regarding your vast mining interests, in which I had hopes of sharing, or of buying a portion outright."

"That isn't what you wanted to say. Out with it!" frowning.

"I simply wished to prove that I am no ordinary adventurer, dear sir, and so prepare you to receive my further words with at least consideration such as a gentleman has the right to expect. Now—I am madly in love with your daughter. I wish to make her my wife!"

"Is this a time to talk of such nonsense, man alive?"

"Why not, when I'm ready to earn your consent?" was the quick retort. "Pledge me your daughter's hand in marriage, and I'll agree to fully avenge your wound! I'll agree to take Mark Mason from the grip of that infernal detective and hang him from the eaves of the marshal's own house, if you like!"

Jasper Clare stared in amazement at the speaker, for the moment almost forgetting his hurts in his blank surprise. Norris saw this, and struck the blow which he had been holding in reserve.

"Never mind how I found it all out, Clare, but it's a sober fact that this detective, Dandy Andy or dandy devil, is hot in love with the pretty sister of the man he is playing such a dirty trick to save from justice. Knowing this, can you believe he really means to deliver his pretended prisoner over to be dealt with by the law? Not a bit of it!"

"You know—you are sure he is after that—that wench?" Jasper Clare huskily asked, choking more than once over the words.

"I know it, and even more. I know—" bending forward and slowly adding: "I heard Mark and his sister laughing last night over your proposal of marriage, and how—"

He left the sentence incomplete, actually frightened by the effect of his malicious speech. Jasper Clare turned fairly purple in the face and half-rose in his bed. A tinge of bloody froth appeared at his lips, and he tried to speak. Only to fall back, shivering like one in a fit.

Norris hastily held a glass to his lips, lifting his head sufficiently to permit the wounded man to swallow. The brief draught seemed to revive him, and after a few quick breaths, Jasper Clare huskily said:

"You swear you'll lynch that rascal?"

"On that one condition, I swear it!" was the instant response.

"Then—call Jess' here—at once!"

Paul Norris longed to obey, but he dared not, after what Mrs. Carew had told him. His eyes glittered with unholy joy, for he felt that his card was about to win the important trick, after all!

He explained to the half-crazed man the necessity for delay, to give Jessamine time for rallying from her severe shock.

"I'll set the mill to grinding without delay, though," his voice hard and merciless. "I've your sacred word that, my work done, you will give me your daughter for a wife!"

"I swear she shall marry you, Paul Norris! If she cuts up rusty, or if she tries to fly in the face of my will, I'll turn her out without a rag to her back!" "I'll—I'll—"

That strong excitement at length produced the effect which might have been foreseen by one less thoroughly selfish than Paul Norris, and Jasper Clare lay like one at the last gasp.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

PAUL NORRIS told a fairly straight story, so far as the manner in which Mark Mason had been saved from the hands of the mob was concerned. Dandy Andy, feeling how hopeless literal flight would be, under the circumstances, resolved to appeal to Cy Near, the city marshal, for temporary aid, feeling confident that he would not be rebuffed.

While Near was busied in giving the half-unconscious young man stimulants, Dandy Andy deftly filled out a blank warrant, inserting all essential particulars, and with this as a convenient blind to the eyes of his friend, the marshal, he felt ready to make a stout fight against the foes of the Twins of Tip-Top.

Yet, busy as he was, and with his hands so full, enlisting trusty men to help guard the prisoner, not against escape but against the grip of the mob, Andrew Griffin found time in which to think of Annie Mason and how this heavy blow could be lightened for her bearing.

He knew that the poor girl must almost certainly hear of the terrible affair with the first breaking of day, if indeed she was not roused in the night, possibly by some of those in search of the supposed assassin.

Against this he could not guard, for he felt that his first duty was owing to Mark, and it was not until fairly sunrise that he succeeded in perfecting his defenses; but this once accomplished, he wasted no time in hastening to the side of the poor girl whom he had learned to love with all the passion of his big heart.

Early though the hour was, Dandy Andy found that others had been before him. Annie

was nearly prostrated by the blow, and though Sally Bunch almost cracked her throat in denying the wild accusations made against her boy, even she was nearly crushed by the calamity.

Dandy Andy quickly reassured them as to the present safety of Mark, and though Aunt Sally held out for a while against his wish to take Annie to her brother, she was finally overruled by the young lady herself.

Leaving Sally to look after the place, Dandy Andy hurried Annie Mason to the house of the city marshal, fortunately meeting with no portion of the still excited searchers by the way. The sight of the armed men gathered near the building gave Annie a serious shock, but Griffin did not allow her time to dwell long on that point, but hurrying her through the lines, soon placed her in the arms of her brother.

It was a sad, almost hysterical meeting on both sides.

Mark had suffered greatly since recovering his senses sufficiently to realize what had transpired at the Clare mansion, for though he could recall little of that tragic interview, and knew nothing of how Jasper Clare came by his hurts, he felt that now all was over between Jessamine and himself. She would hate him—the accused assassin of her only parent!

"At the very worst, no jury could bring a harsher verdict than a blow struck in self-defense," declared Dandy Andy.

"But you didn't—you never struck him, brother!" sobbed Annie.

Mark sat with bowed head, his ghastly pale face deeply lined and marked with pain. He shivered slightly at this, and he found it no easy task to enunciate the words:

"I don't know—I can't say, dear. If I did strike him, it was while his grip was choking me—while I knew nothing of what my hands were doing. It's all a horrible blank to me, even yet!"

"You don't carry a knife, as a rule, dear fellow?" asked Griffin.

"I never carry one, unless out on a hunt or fishing trip. I never had even a penknife with me last night. The weapon must have belonged to him, and my hands unconsciously grasped it—if I really did deal the blow!"

For the first time since realizing what had happened, Mark showed signs of animation, and Dandy Andy quickly caught at the opening:

"You think Clare cut himself by accident, Mark?"

"I don't know what to think," sinking back into that abject gloom once more. "I did have a notion—but that could hardly be!"

Dandy Andy pressed the point until he learned all there was to be gained, which surely was not much. Mark seemed to dimly remember the presence of another than Jasper Clare in the darkened room, before his senses fled entirely before that deadly grip. It may only have been one of the wild fancies born of such a hideous situation, but the Diamond Detective hoped for better things. It was a clew, and fitted in fairly well with a certain discovery which he had himself made.

Little by little Mark yielded to the caresses of his twin, softening under her tears and tender care, until he made a full and complete confession of the secret which he had sought to guard so jealously within his own heart.

He told how long and hopelessly he had loved the fair daughter of his employer, and how, by mutual peril, those fancied barriers had been broken down. For the first time Annie learned of the frightful peril to which her brother had been subjected only a few hours ago, and though her arms were wound about him, safe and sound, the tale gave her still another severe shock.

As Mark went on to tell of his visit to the Clare mansion, with the strangely harsh and insulting demeanor of his employer, Annie grew more and more agitated, breaking down at last with a pitiful cry:

"My fault—only for me—poor brother!"

It was Mark's turn to act as consoler, in which he was greatly aided by Dandy Andy. And then, with many a painful break and amid her self-reproaching sobs, Annie told the story of Jasper Clare's visit to the shop, his warning, his almost fierce proposal of marriage, her rejection of his suit, his mad assault and the manner in which Sally Bunch came to the rescue with her dripping mop!

"Glory to Sally!" cried Dandy Andy, showing a degree of excitement most unusual in one of his cool brain and steady nerves. "I'll give her a rousing smack for that, mop or no mop! I wish I had been there to see—and act!"

Despite her sore troubles, Annie blushed warmly at those last words. Now, if never before, she began to see how deeply she had interested this dashing stranger, though the thought was but a fleeting one. With poor Mark in such trouble, how could she give a thought to such?

It was finally decided that, in all probability, this ignominious defeat had been the prime cause of Jasper's Clare's acting so unlike his usual self, though there was scant comfort to be drawn from that conclusion, after all.

"Only because it clears away one puzzling cloud," remarked Dandy Andy. "We'll accept

it as a good omen, and try to believe that in the end all other clouds will fade just as surely."

Mark was hardly in a condition to appreciate this remark, however. Let what might happen to himself, what matter! Jessamine was forever lost to him, even if Jasper Clare should recover from his injuries.

"Not if she is a woman worth loving," obstinately declared the Diamond Detective, giving Annie's hand a gentle pressure which seemed to indicate his firm belief that the world contained just such another true and faithful maiden. "Not when she knows the truth of last night. Not when she knows how brutally the fellow insulted you, and even tried to kill you. Why, man!" with flashing eyes, as he added: "Even if he is her father, she would scorn you for not striking back under such circumstances!"

"But he didn't—you never struck him, Mark!" faltered Annie.

"I don't know. I can't remember cutting him. I can't recall much of anything after he caught me by the throat. It took me so completely by surprise, that I hadn't even a chance to avoid him, or to resist. I know I carried no weapon with me to the house. And yet—I can't make oath that I didn't stab him!"

"It's for him to prove that you did cut him, bear in mind, dear fellow!" briskly interposed Dandy Andy. "You can swear that you were unarmed when you entered that room, and if anything, he must have cut himself while trying to murder you!"

Annie shivered, moaning huskily as she freed that surreptitiously imprisoned hand to help hide her eyes. It was all so frightful!

Dandy Andy frowned a bit, though it was not altogether because he was robbed of that dainty little paw.

"If I could only have corralled that same knife!" he muttered, biting his lip sharply. "If it really belonged to Clare, little danger of its ever turning up as evidence for or against you, my lad!"

"But you said—"

"And I say it over again, dear Miss Mason," declared Griffin, once more securing the hand he liked so well to touch. "Mark shall never be arrested or go to trial until I'm all ready to prove him innocent before the eyes of even his bitterest enemies. If I can't do that, then I'll take him across the line to Kansas, in spite of their teeth!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DIAMOND DETECTIVE'S VOW.

MARK MASON roused up at this bold declaration, a flush tinging his cheeks, something of resentment showing in his eyes as in his voice.

"You doubtless mean well, Mr. Griffin, but you are letting that friendship carry you a little too far. I'll never be called a cowardly runaway. I'd sooner face the gang and feel the rope."

"I don't doubt it in the least, Mark!" and Dandy Andy laughed softly, yet with a certain resolute light in his eyes. "You're built just that way. But fortunately for those who love you, old fellow, you are only a passenger now, and have got to follow the course laid out by a cooler if no wiser pilot. In other words, I'm running this thing, and I'll save you from yourself if I have to really lodge you in jail under the warrant I now hold!"

Mark flashed up with something of his old fire, and Annie shrank from the light speaker, but Dandy Andy caught a hand of each, sitting down between them and gravely adding:

"I'm the best friend you've got left, Mark, not counting your sister, here. I don't say it in boasting, but as a simple fact, and if you will listen to what I've got to say further, I think you will admit I am acting all for the best."

"I knew it—you must trust him brother!" impulsively cried Annie, hope springing into her face and glowing in her eyes.

Dandy Andy pressed her hand in appreciation, but let it pass without remark, for the present. His main point was to convince Mark.

"You both seem to think all this trouble springs simply from the mop Aunt Sally so deftly wielded, but I'm sure you're wrong. No doubt that helped, though Jasper Clare richly deserved all he got, and more too. But it only helped. Back of that lies a mystery which I have spent nearly two years in trying to solve. I'll cut the story as short as I can, while making it clear enough for you to catch my meaning, friends. Will you bear with me if it seems tedious at first?"

"You have earned the right to command us!" impulsively replied Annie, and though he said nothing, Mark seemed to acquiesce.

"I thank you, Annie!" for the first time calling her by that name, without the prefix. "Some day I may thank you even more fully, but now I'll stick to the story I set out to narrate.

"A long time ago—never mind the precise number of years for the present—Manton Legere and his wife were blessed with twin babes, a boy and a girl. Legere was rich in money and lands, but he considered himself

far richer in his wife and his children, and justly.

"He had a sister, who married twice. Her first husband was named Hall, and by him she had one son, named Maurice. Hall died, and she wedded again, this time a wealthy gentleman named Wilcox. And by a curious coincidence, twins were given them, within a few days after the Legeres were blessed in the same manner.

"All this occurred not long before the war broke out between the North and the South. Both men entered the army, Legere only serving a short time, a severe wound forcing him to resign. Wilcox served until the end of the war, coming out as a major.

"It was during his absence from home that the twin children of the Legeres were stolen, in hopes of gaining a heavy ransom, as it was naturally supposed at the time. Of course instant search was instituted, only to end in what seemed an awful tragedy. The kidnappers and the children were believed all to have perished in a sudden squall, while fleeing from pursuit by water.

"That blow shortened the lives of both parents. Mrs. Legere never fully revived, and when she heard that awful news, she sunk into death, to be followed within the year by her husband.

"During this time of trouble the twice-married sister, Sarah Wilcox, never tired in her attentions to the bereaved ones, even seeming to neglect her own small children in her sympathy for her brother and her brother's wife. And after that wife died, she disposed of her own residence, moving into that belonging to Manton Legere, devoting herself to caring and trying to comfort her brother.

"Naturally enough he paid much attention to the twins so nearly the age of his own lost babes, and before he died, he made his will in their favor, leaving this world without once suspecting the hideous truth—that he owed all his sorrow to the woman who fawned over him in her base covetousness.

"The truth was never suspected by any one save that evil woman until after the close of the war. Then, during a severe spell of sickness, the woman let the awful truth leak out during her wild delirium, and her soul-sick husband was forced to realize how terribly he had been deceived in the wife whom he had honored no less than he loved her.

"That delirium lasted for many weeks, and after his first horror had time to dull a bit, Marion Wilcox carefully noted down her wild ravings, joining them together until he had the whole black crime written out in full. Then, when the delirium was over, he taxed his wife with her crime, and before she died he won her full confession.

"It had been committed through her maternal love, she declared. They were poor, her brother enormously rich. Why should her twin babes be stinted, while his reveled in wealth, and all that wealth could buy?

"Poor Wilcox, naturally easy-going, weak-willed, it may be, and still further shaken by his hideous discovery, was forced to swear to keep that secret still. His wife threatened to rise from the grave to haunt and curse him if he robbed her children of the riches she had won for them at such a fearful cost. And—he took that oath!

"But it seemed to carry its own punishment with it. His step-son speedily went to the bad, fleeing after murdering a man over a game of cards. His twins failed, fading away day by day despite all that money could do for them, and something like six years ago they died, one only a week after the other, leaving Wilcox completely broken down.

"He had fairly idolized his children, and he began to believe that they were taken away as a partial punishment to him for his sin in following the last words of his wife. Yet, how could he make amends?

"It would take too long to tell you just how he found a clew that for the first time led him to believe the children of Manton Legere were still living; I'll explain everything when we have more time. For now let it suffice that such a clew was found, and from that day to this Marion Wilcox has lived only to make reparation for his wife's sin of those long ago days.

"Now—can you guess how all this concerns you, Mark and Annie? Do you still believe that William Mason is your real parent? Does nothing tell you that you are those long-lost twins?"

There was no immediate reply. Both Annie and Mark were too completely amazed to readily find words in which their emotions could be clearly outlined.

Never for an instant had they ever doubted their paternity, and even now they could not trace the possible connection between themselves and the stolen children of Manton Legere.

Dandy Andy laughed softly as he watched their puzzled, wondering looks, and it is possible that he would have set about throwing more light upon the subject, only for the sudden increase of noise on the street in close proximity to the house they then occupied, and

for the abrupt entrance of Cy Near, the marshal, who said:

"There's a little circus coming, I reckon, friends, but don't let the racket disturb you one mite, ma'am," nodding cheerfully toward Annie. "All Tip-Top can't get in when I say out, and the boys'll have to import help before taking a man from under my wing, when he's been tucked there strictly according to law."

"I'll be with you in a minute, pardner," assured Dandy Andy, as the marshal drew back through the door. "I want to say just a word or two more, first."

"Oh, there isn't any particular hurry, Dandy," with a grim smile on his strong yet good-natured face. "I wouldn't have mentioned it, only I reckoned the lady might be new to such a racket. The boys are only bowling for pure fun, and they'll subside as soon as I crook a finger at 'em!"

"You will not let them—my poor brother!" sobbed Annie, clinging to the man in whom she saw a friendly shield to her loved one.

"I'll save him from them, of course, darling," bending his head and pressing a kiss upon her quivering lips. "I'll save him from all harm, and even more than that!" with increased fervor as his arms drew the maiden to his swelling bosom. "I swear to clear him from this foul accusation—swear it by the pure and honest love I bear for you, my darling! And then—when the clouds all roll by—I'll come to you for my pay, sweet!" he added, almost in a whisper, kissing her once more, then hurriedly leaving the room to see just how matters stood outside.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A THOROUGHBRED RASCAL.

CY NEAR'S announced "circus" proved nothing more than a "side-show," and that of the cheapest possible description.

A few of "the boys," not too drunk to entirely forget their discretion, gathered together and marched upon the house in which the Diamond Detective had so adroitly entrenched himself with his prisoner, loudly demanding vengeance for the murdered Boss of Tip-Top. But they lacked a leader, and after a great waste of whisky-scented breath, the majority of them reeled away to swallow more liquid enthusiasm, mainly at the expense of Paul Norris, though he thus far kept his hand from actually showing itself in the racket.

In fact, he was simply "feeling the pulse" of the Tip-Top-ians, and getting ready for a master stroke in case he thought it well to press matters to the utmost.

This depended in part on Jasper Clare. If he died before he could make Jessamine understand how he had pledged her hand, Norris would hardly risk his own life by heading a lynching party. And just at the present time, no man could say whether Jasper Clare would ever rally from that strange stupor into which he had fallen while Paul Norris was so loyally watching by his bed!

Paul Norris might have felt this blow more severely if he had had fewer irons in the fire. As it was, he did all he could to improve his time.

Thanks to the fresh excitement arising from the tragic events at the Clare residence, the still unexplained disappearance of Major Wilcox had apparently been lost sight of entirely. Dandy Andy had his hands full in defending his young friend, and apparently there was nothing to interfere with Norris in his further designs on the ex-cavalryman.

Making use of the secret imparted by Deacon Jones, Paul Norris entered the saloon-keeper's sleeping apartment, passing from thence along the course already described, ending at the inner cellar in which we have seen the missing man ensconced.

He paused at the barred door, bending his head to listen. No sound came from within, and only pausing long enough to readjust the rude disguise which he had donned on descending the steps, Paul Norris opened the door, casting a band of light before him from his unmasked lantern.

The mellow rays fell upon the pale, haggard, anxious face of the prisoner, and satisfied that all was well, Norris entered the damp, chilly den, closing the door behind him, hanging up his lamp where it left his own person in the shadow while showing the prisoner plainly.

"Evenin' to ye, critter!" Norris croaked, in a coarse, disguised voice, designed to perfect the rude disguise he wore. "Gittin' sorter lonesome waitin' fer the clouds to roll by, ain't ye? Wouldn't mind ketchin' a squint at the sun, or sookin' in a swaller o' fresh air?"

There was nothing to prevent Major Wilcox from answering his visitor, though when first left alone in the cellar, it had been with a stout gag between his jaws. This, after a brief discussion with Deacon Jones, who declared that even should the old gentleman try to attract attention and receive aid by shouting aloud, his voice could not possibly reach the outer air, had been removed.

A few other changes had been made, such as confining the prisoner with a chain secured about his middle, long enough to permit him to move about a few inches, to rise erect and to

lie down with comparative ease. A rusty pair of handcuffs adorned his wrists, now brought in front of him, in place of being bound behind his back with thongs.

As Paul Norris squatted down before the prisoner, Major Wilcox seemed stung into fury by the coarse mockery, for he cried:

"You cowardly cur! Think I don't know you? Think I am blind as a bat, even yet, Maurice Hall?"

The villain started, stifling a vicious curse in his throat, but the surprise was far too sudden and complete for him to conceal his discomposure, and Major Wilcox laughed, bitterly.

"The report reached home that you were dead, Maurice, and I gave thanks on my bended knees that you had at least escaped being publicly hanged! It was more than I had dared hope for. I felt that you were sure, sooner or later, to still further disgrace the once honored name my parent gave into my care. Now—"

"Now the quicker you drop that sort of chant the better for your own rascally hide, step-daddy!" harshly interposed the plotter, removing the 'kerchief from his face, no longer trying to dissemble. "You talk of disgracing the family name! You? And for years you have just been wallowing in the wealth which—shall I say it was stolen, step-father?"

Major Wilcox closed his eyes, bent his head, shivering violently. Even yet he could not bear that sore touched without flinching. Even with his wife so many years in her grave, and knowing as he did how terribly she had sinned, he could not bring forward a defense by which he must attack her memory, even though this was her son who taunted him with the crime his own mother had committed.

Paul Norris—as he might as well be called, though he had not denied that other name when given him—laughed coarsely, jeeringly, his utterly vile nature still further revealed by the words which followed from his lips:

"Bab! you make me woefully weary, Wilcox! You know, as I know, that you had no finger in that dainty pie of long ago. You never had grit or git-up enough about you to even dream of such a coup. Yet you shut your teeth and try to grin when I charged you with the stroke my good mother dealt! Bab! I could kick myself for taking the trouble to plot and play cunning against such a pitiful adversary!"

"She was your mother, boy," brokenly uttered the old man. "She is in her grave. Let her rest, undisturbed by your brutal scoffs and jeers. If she sinned, it was through her great love for her children!"

"For the twins—exactly," with a cold laugh, his eyes glowing redly in the light of the lantern. "Not for me, though her first born. I might go hang! I might starve in the kennel! I might—"

"Because even her maternal love couldn't blind her to the fact that you were rotten to the very core!" flashed Wilcox, spiritedly.

"My mother's son, to boil it down," laughed Norris, regaining his temper as by magic. "All right. You ask to let the dead be dead. I'm agreeable, since the living and the living's fortunes interest me heap more. What did you hope to gain by coming to this god-forsaken region, Major Wilcox? Surely speculation has not bitten you, at your age?"

There was no reply to these questions. The old gentleman closed his eyes, leaning back against the cold, damp wall, his face that of one who, knowing how fruitless would be expostulation, had resolved to show no mental weakness in which his persecutor might revel.

"Stubborn, you old rascal!" snapped Norris, showing his teeth viciously. "All right! I'm feeling just mean enough to talk with the bark on, and since you've pulled down the thin wall between us, let it be plain cut-and-thrust from now on!"

"I look for no mercy at your hands," was the cold, unshaken retort. "From the first—from the moment in which I began to suspect who you were, Maurice Hall—I have never once counted on receiving anything like just or generous treatment at your hands."

"Then you'll not be disappointed, which should be a slight consolation, step-daddy!" chuckled the villain, settling himself into a more comfortable position before adding: "All right. Plain talk goes. And as a proof—you came here to make the most of the scent struck by your bloodhound. You thought to purify your noble soul in your declining days by unloading your wealth upon the long-lost children of Manton Legere, better known in these parts as the Twins of Tip-Top!"

Norris narrowly watched the effect of his words, but that faint, fleeting smile puzzled and annoyed him. It was almost as if Marion Wilcox felt the victor, even while loaded with the chains of defeat!

"You came mighty nigh catching me by surprise, old fellow," he resumed, banishing that wild suspicion as wholly without foundation. "I only hit upon it by a lucky chance, though I was keeping an eye on the maneuverings of your hired bloodhound, Dandy Andy. It was a rare bit of good luck that threw your letter of advice into my hands: you see, I promised to be perfectly frank!"

Dandy Andy, the Diamond Detective.

That letter, I'm sure, was misdelivered to a friend of mine, and I happened to catch sight of the direction, and I put it in your hand. Naturally I accepted it as the missive. Why not? I was so anxious to know how my honored step-daddy was prospering.

"Not knowing what its contents were, I opened it carefully, then sealed it again, though I hardly meant it should ever reach Griffin's hands. I lost the letter somewhere, but that don't matter now. Through it I made one point. I knew when to expect you, and I prepared a little surprise-party for your especial benefit. It was risky, but you gave me such scant warning that I couldn't arrange anything better.

"You know how it failed—thanks to Dandy Andy! And yet, only for your ride down the Flume, you wouldn't be here to-day, so that sort of evens matters up.

"Why have I gone to so much trouble? That's easy told. I am my mother's only surviving child. You were my mother's husband. You are rich. You are hunting for an heir. That hits me right where I live, and you need search no longer!"

"Not one dollar of my wealth shall you finger, you scoundrel!"

"That sounds just as though you meant it, but you lie in saying so, all the same, step-daddy! Not only one dollar, but every dollar and every dollar's worth! It is my birthright, and be sure I'll claim my own without shame or scruple. As for those twins—listen to what has stirred all Tip-Top from center to circumference!"

"One of those twins is now under arrest for forgery, or some crime of the same description. If that isn't enough, he stabbed a man last night, without cause or provocation. That man lies at the point of death. And if he should die—well, even as I made my way to this delightful summer retreat, I saw the mob gathering. I heard them muttering about ropes and nooses! Maybe you can imagine what the outcome will be, in this wild and woolly region."

"Your evil work!" exclaimed the prisoner.

Paul Norris started sharply, but tried to cover his movement by assuming another position before adiring:

"You do me too much credit, step-daddy! Not that I love the young fellow, though he has a sweet little sister who—but perhaps it would shock you too dreadfully if I dwell on that point?" with a low, devilish laugh that sent a shiver through the old man's veins. "Still, I don't mind saying that the lady will be carefully attended to, and so treated that she will never advance a claim to your fortune."

"Now for yourself, Major Wilcox," his whole manner changing, his voice growing full of vicious menacing as he added: "If you legally transfer all your property to me, under my right name, satisfying the lawyer whom I will introduce to you that there is no trick hidden underneath, I'll spare your worthless life and restore you to liberty."

"You are wasting your breath, you evil cur!" flashed the old gentleman, anger getting the better of prudence. "I can and will foil you where you'll feel the hurt worst! I've made a will, confessing all that happened long ago, leaving every dollar I own to the children of Manton Legere. Failing them, it reverts to charity!"

"You—you dare tell me this?" hoarsely panted the villain.

"I swear it by the graves of my dead children!" solemnly.

For a brief space Paul Norris seemed stunned, but then he rallied.

"You old fool!" he cried, his voice hardly recognizable. "You have sealed your own fate by those words! You shall make another will, naming me your sole heir. I'll torture you into yielding, and make you suffer a million deaths in one for each hour you hold out! You know me. I give you just twenty-four hours to make up your mind!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FEATHERING HIS OWN NEST.

"It's a wee mite early, I know, but I reckon maybe you wouldn't mind having your supper a bit ahead of time—steady, boss! These blessed irons are too rusty for any use!"

Placing the tray of cold victuals and drink on the damp floor, Deacon Jones set about unlocking the handcuffs which hampered the old gentleman. There was nothing out of the way in this, since such had been his custom from the very first when bringing Major Wilcox his meals; yet the prisoner felt a vague thrill of hope, nevertheless.

Up to this time his jailer had invariably worn a rude but effectual disguise in the shape of a flour sack drawn over his head and shoulders, with a narrow slit through which he might use his eyes. But now his face was bare, his tones more friendly, his speech less barbarously uncouth.

Was this simply because Paul Norris, or Maurice Hall, had thrown aside all disguise? Was it solely because this benchman of his felt no dread of future punishment for his share in this dastardly outrage, knowing how viciously his employer had threatened the ex-cavalryman with torture and death?

This might be the reason, but Major Wilcox thought different.

"Do you love money?" he bluntly demanded, acting on that frail hope without delay. "Do you want to be rich—to handle more gold than you ever dreamed of possessing?"

"Wouldn't you take me for a fool if I said no?"

"How much do you get for holding me here a prisoner?"

"Pretty fair wages, as the times go."

"I ask because I'll give you ten times as much to help me out of this miserable den," eagerly said Wilcox, his haggard face lighting up with a hope such as he had not dared to feel since falling into the merciless grip of his step-son.

"It doesn't strain your jaws one bit to talk so big, does it?" the Deacon asked, with a doubting glitter in his deep-sunken eyes. "And I reckon it wouldn't harm you a bit more to yelp for the police the very minute you were clear of this shebang!"

"I'll take any oath you may dictate, and give you any reward within the bounds of reason!" flashed the prisoner, eagerly.

"Take it as cool as you can, pardner," nodded Deacon Jones, settling himself as for a cosey chat. "Eat your grub, and then if we can't come to terms, there'll be no time cut to waste. Yes, I mean it," with a sharp nod. "Balk, and I'll cut my stick, leaving you to the feast the boss has promised you. Business, pardner!"

It was hard to obey, and each mouthful threatened to suffocate him, but Marion Wilcox dared not refuse. There was a dubious, hesitating light in those dark eyes that told how little it would take to drive away his solitary chance for life and liberty.

"To tell the truth and shame the devil, pardner, I was sort of bluffed into this little game, almost before I knew what was up. And if I had even suspected who and what you were, I wouldn't have moved a step in it, either!"

"It is not too late to make amends, and I will pay you richly!"

"I begin to believe you would," nodded Deacon Jones. "That is, from the case as you look at it now. But—pardner, the little game is a mighty sight bigger than even you think! For one thing, turning you loose would call for shoot or be shot, the minute my boss, as you call him, set eyes on me."

"Set me free, and I'll have him in irons before an hour passes!"

"That would stop his trigger-picking, sure enough," chuckled Jones, though his gaunt face remained immobile as ever. "And, do you know, at the very set-out I told him that if you oversize his pile, I'd give him the shake? To be sure, I said that I'd let him know your figures before accepting them, so he might raise or call. That was only fair between pals, you see."

"I'll give hundreds where he offers tens. Name your price, and consider it accepted. It's death for me to stay in here!"

"That's what!" with an emphatic nod. "The boss is red-hot, and he means to pinch you until you sing his pet tune. Then—Well, he said he'd give me two thousand for putting you out of the way for good!"

"I'll give you ten to set me free and take me to Andrew Griffin!"

"If it was only the turning loose, I'd jump at the offer with as big a thank you as I could spit out without losing my teeth. But—your name is Marion Wilcox? You came here in search of a long-lost heir? That fellow who's got you under his thumb is your step-son?"

The major nodded assent, staring in mute surprise at the speaker, wondering when and where he won so much information.

"Just as easy as listening at a key-hole," chuckled Deacon Jones. "Heap sight easier than any other man in all Tip-Top, too, because I happened to know a good share of the story long before this day."

"You know—you can tell me—"

"The whole story, from A to Ampersand," quickly nodded the saloon-keeper, his little eyes glowing redly in the dim light.

"Then you—you must have had a hand in kidnapping the twins!" ejaculated Wilcox, springing to his feet, only to be jerked helplessly back by the chain secured to his middle.

Deacon Jones hastily drew back out of possible reach, though he showed no signs of bodily fear in his queer mask of a face.

"I ain't saying that, pardner, but I am saying that I can clear up the entire mystery of the past. I can tell just who stole the kids, who hired them, how they covered their trail, where they went and—if it is really made worth while, I mean, of course!"

"Prove your words, and I'll make you rich for life!" hoarsely exclaimed the major, almost overcome by this deliberate statement.

"I can prove them, if everything rolls my way, sir," with more of respect and deference in his tones and manner. "I can put my hand on just what you're looking for, right here in Tip-Top. But—money alone isn't enough, you want to understand, sir. I must have more. I must have your word of honor, backed by a written guarantee that you nor your friends or detectives shall prosecute me for anything I may

have done in the past, as well as in this little boggle."

"I swear to grant every point you wish," said Wilcox, with difficulty keeping his strong emotions in check. "I will pay you twenty thousand dollars the hour you prove the identity of Manton Legere's child! And I will pledge you perfect immunity for all past crimes in connection with this sad case. More than that, of course, I can't do."

"I wouldn't be hog enough to ask it, sir," responded Deacon Jones, plainly delighted with this truly magnificent offer, so far beyond anything which he had anticipated.

"Then—quick!" rising to his feet and impatiently shaking his chains. "Set me free! Take me out of this horrible den! Let me see the sun shining once more, and I'll try to believe the glory is breaking after all! Quick—that demon may come at any moment!"

But Deacon Jones showed no signs of complying with this natural expectation, drawing back and shaking his head.

"It's too big a stake to risk, sir, and you've got to hold on in patience until I clear the way. That rascal might knock you on the head long before I could get you to a safe spot. Too risky, I say!"

"Let the risk be mine, then," still clinging to hope, though the tortured gentleman began to dimly suspect that all this was but the cruel prelude to the tortures which Maurice Hall had promised him. "I only ask you to let me out of this den. Once in the open air, I'll defend myself, old as I am!"

"Of course I'd hate to have you come to harm, but I wasn't thinking of that, precisely," muttered Deacon Jones, with the ghost of a smile. "Selfish, perhaps, but natural. I was thinking that with you my pretty fortune would kick the bucket, too!"

"Then what course do you propose to follow?"

"Leave you here, just as I found you," was the prompt reply. "Go out and hunt up your man, Dandy Andy—and he is a dandy, too! You'd ought to have seen him pound Thumper Pete!"

Major Wilcox sank back with a faint groan. He felt that he had been shamefully played with all along, and his heart grew sick within him as he resigned that brief but glorious hope.

"Don't you think it, sir, for I'm playing you just as white as I trust you will treat me. I'm going to find Dandy Andy. I'll fetch him here, have him back your word, then I'll turn you loose and tell all I know about the kids you're looking for. If anything should keep me until your step-son comes, don't let him suspect anything. Bluff him off, for I'll bring you solid help—I swear it!"

Before Major Wilcox could say aught, Deacon Jones left the cellar, closing the door behind him. Then, faintly, indistinctly, the prisoner heard a sharp cry, followed by a pistol-shot!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LAST LINK.

DEACON JONES was just in the act of dropping the trap-door behind him when he was viciously assaulted by the evil man who had employed him as jailer to Major Marion Wilcox.

"Sell me out, will you?" grated Paul Norris, striking with all the power of his muscular arm, sending his steel deep down through flesh and sinew, gripping the throat of his intended victim with his other hand, trying to smother all possible outcry.

But he had to deal with a man who was hard to wholly surprise, and though Deacon Jones could not guard himself against that vicious stroke, he could and did strike back with just as much venom.

His pistol exploded, and with a choking, shuddering cry, Paul Norris reeled back, to fall in a shivering heap on the floor.

Deacon Jones sunk backward, with everything whirling, swimming, dancing before his eyes. He tried to shout aloud for help, but his vocal organs seemed paralyzed. He felt that he was dying, and with a horrible batred toward the man whose arm had stricken him low without warning, he tried to lift his pistol and steady it long enough to send another bullet through that body!

Before he could succeed in this, however, the door was burst open and several men, at the head of whom was Peter McCarn, rushed into the room, taking in the bloody scene at a glance. Big Pete was on the point of crushing what might remain of life out of the man whom he instinctively felt must have injured his patron so severely, but the sight of this lean Deacon Jones strength to cry out:

"Freeze to him, but I'll shoot the man that dares hurt him! He's got to hang!"

"Pin the door, some o' you critters!" cried Pete the Thumper, changed from avenger to protector by the magic of a few words. "Ef a bull gang gits in byar, we'll hev to fight ag'in' lynchin'."

"Go for Dandy Andy—bring doctor, too!" roared Deacon Jones, fighting back that horrible faintness through his fierce lust for revenge on Maurice Hall.

"He's boss, an' I reckon he knows what he

wants the most," grimly nodded McCarn, as his fellows looked at him for further enlightenment, since the head of their chief drooped and his eyes closed as though to await the speedy coming of death. "Skin out as quick as the law 'lows, an' fetch the Dandy hyar ef ye hef to kerry him!"

"Say Wilcox—here, prisoner!" gasped Deacon Jones, seeming to rally after that brief sinking spell. "Go—burry! Pete—plug me up—hang him, devil toast!"

Fortunately for all concerned save the false Paul Norris, Cy Near was passing close enough to the Sanctuary to catch the echo of that pistol-shot, and though, having his hands so full with that sad Clare affair, he might not have thought it wisest to investigate the matter on his own hook, he could not turn a deaf ear to the excited call of the fellow who had set out in search of the Diamond Detective.

"Bad luck to you if you're giving me a stall, Patsey!" the marshal grimly said, his eyes glowing hotly at the mention of that name, he knowing how much uneasiness the strange disappearance of Major Wilcox had caused the Diamond Detective.

Cy Near made his way to that little dark room, taking in the truth at a glance. Deacon Jones brightened up at his entrance, though plainly disappointed that it was not Dandy Andy.

He told the officer where Major Wilcox was hidden, and swore that he was the prisoner of Paul Norris. He begged that Dandy Andy be sent for without further delay, for—

"Who's taking my name in vain?" came a clear, pleasant voice, and the Diamond Detective entered the room, sweeping his keen gaze over all and seeming to realize the importance of prompt action.

"Bring him—he knows!" gasped Deacon Jones, turning his sunken eyes once more toward the trap-door in the floor. "Wilcox—let him out—I promised to—set free!"

Dandy Andy caught at the clew quickly, and lifting the trap he leaped down the steps, soon finding the barred door beyond. As he flung this open, out of the darkness came a cry of mingled relief and joy:

"Thank God! at last, Griffin!"

Though his own keen eyes were of no avail in that darkness, Dandy Andy quickly discovered the truth, and in a very short time thereafter he had released his employer from his chains, aiding him up the steps to the room above, now lighted more clearly by a couple of lamps from the saloon.

Major Wilcox almost instantly recognized his false step son, and without at first realizing his wound, sternly denounced him as the prime cause of the outrage he had received.

"Confess, you graceless sinner!" he sternly cried, dropping to his knees beside the feebly moaning wretch, his bony fingers sharply contracting about an arm. "Confess that—"

"Mercy! spare me! I confess—I stabbed him so—so I—"

Dandy Andy caught these broken words, and with a cat-like bound he reached the side of the major and actually lifted him clear of the floor, swinging him around to drop him into the arms of the marshal. He at once took the place Wilcox had filled, speaking clearly:

"You stabbed Jasper Clare, Paul Norris? The whole truth is out, but as a sinner whom death is about to claim, I ask you to make full and free confession. It can work you no further harm, for you are dying already!"

"Save me—I can't die!" gasped the miserable wretch, shivering convulsively, shrinking from that firm touch, yet a moment later trying to move still closer, as though he might thus escape the grim monster.

"Confess, or we'll leave you to die alone and in the dark," coldly persisted the detective.

"Who stabbed Jasper Clare?"

"Don't—don't leave me! More light, for—Drive them away!"

"Who stabbed Jasper Clare?"

"I did. I stabbed him, but I meant to kill Mark Mason. Now—"

"You hear his confession, gentlemen?" cried Dandy Andy, glancing around the room with his eyes fairly aglow with triumphant joy. "You can all bear witness that he admitted the deed of his own free will."

He turned as though hoping to get a still fuller confession from the crippled sinner, but fear, pain and loss of blood had caused Maurice Hall to faint, and for the moment Dandy Andy was forced to abandon his purpose. He was just on the point of examining the wound received by the schemer, when one of the messengers returned with a physician, into whose hands Dandy Andy at once resigned the wounded man.

"I can't do anything for him!" the doctor declared gravely, after making an examination. "To attempt aught would only add torture to his last moments. If you wish to learn anything from him before death, I can give a stimulant, but—"

"His death is certain?" asked Wilcox.

"As certain as death itself, sir."

"Then give him something to brace him up until he can make a complete confession," gravely interposed Dandy Andy.

The doctor prepared the draught, trusting it to the hands of the detective, then turned his attention to Deacon Jones, urged to do his best in this direction by Major Wilcox.

His worst fears in this direction were somewhat calmed, however, the doctor declaring that, though seriously injured, there was a good fighting chance for recovery, unless blood-poisoning should set in.

Dandy Andy succeeded in getting Maurice Hall to swallow the reviving draught, and then put question after question to the dying criminal, Cy Near rapidly recording both questions and answers, resolved to leave no excuse for questioning the justice of his acting as he had in defending the alleged assassin of Jasper Clare.

Thanks to that draught, concentrating the powers of the surely doomed wretch, he was able to talk with comparative ease, though all who watched him could plainly note the steady advance of death by the changes his face underwent.

Promised liberty and immunity from prosecution in return for full confession, Maurice Hall kept back nothing, telling how he shadowed Mark Mason from the bakery to the house of his loved one; how he spied upon them there, until the return of Jasper Clare; how he suspected trouble between parent and lover, and when it came, how he entered at the open window, meaning to stab Mark Mason, then by laying the crime on Jasper Clare, forcing him to consent to his marriage with Jessamine, when he would swear he saw all, and that Mark killed himself in trying to murder the mine-owner.

"I loved her—it was all to win Jessamine!" he panted faintly.

"And she's one of the lost twins!" cried Deacon Jones firmly.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A GENERAL CLEARING UP.

Two men uttered sharp exclamations at that declaration, but there was a wide difference between the feelings which prompted their utterance. Major Wilcox was exultant, Dandy Andy chagrined.

Deacon Jones seemed to understand, and just the ghost of a smile flitted across his hard, gray face as his gaze rested for a moment on the flushing countenance of the Diamond Detective.

"I know just how you feel, Mr. Griffin," he said, with a nod, "but truth is truth, and I'd ought to know. For—I helped steal the kids, and I sold the girl twin to a man who calls himself Jasper Clare this day!"

This fresh sensation would doubtless have excited greater interest if, just then, Maurice Hall had not entered upon his last fierce battle with the grim destroyer.

It was a fitting end for such an evil life, but even those who abhorred him most for his crimes, turned pale and averted their eyes, sick at heart.

It was a frightful scene, which cannot be described in full. The miserable wretch died hard, cursing, screaming, praying by turns. Dandy Andy and Pete McCarn tried to restrain the maniac from injuring himself in his furious struggles, but even their powers hardly sufficed while that horrible delirium lasted. Then—just as a flood of water extinguishes a flame, his spark of life went out!

It was night before the end came, but within an hour afterward, all Tip-Top knew the true story of how Jasper Clare came by what promised to be his death-wound.

Dandy Andy left this part of the work to Cy Near, and right thoroughly did the worthy marshal acquit himself of the duty.

Griffin was satisfied with informing the Twins of Tip-Top, and while doing this—with a hand of Mark, and a hand of Annie Mason in his genial clasp, he wholly forgot the wounds his professional pride had that evening received.

After all, had he not almost hoped Major Wilcox would prove in the right? Had he not fairly wished that Annie was poor and dependent, so that he could offer her a home, a husband?

But he never alluded to the story of the long-lost twins on that evening, for both he and Major Wilcox had decided to keep the matter quiet until after Deacon Jones and Jasper Clare could be brought together, thus enabling the former to make good his assertions.

Nor did Dandy Andy just then venture to ask Annie for the reward he had asked, or rather insinuated he intended to ask, when he had fully exonerated Mark from that dark charge of attempted murder. It was no easy task to restrain, especially when the agitated girl looked into his eyes, her own filled with tears of intense gratefulness, her voice falteringly blessing him for having so quickly brushed away that hideous cloud.

A great crowd gathered about the house, all cheering and shouting the praises of the young man whom, but a few short hours before, the majority of them would joyously have dragged to a shameful death under the gallows-tree! But such is life, and Mark Mason really meant what he said, when he briefly thanked them for their good will, begging them to permit his sorely shaken sister to pass without delay.

Dandy Andy escorted the Twins of Tip-Top back to the little bakery, where Sally Bunch, temporarily forgetting her inbred hatred and distrust of all mankind, actually flung her arms about Dandy's neck, smacking his lips until the little shop echoed again!

Possibly this was why Dandy Andy was so brief in parting from Annie, going with Mark to the Clare residence.

Time had worked a most favorable change in this quarter, as well. Jessamine had rallied from that awful shock, and had already learned how fully her lover had been cleared from the charge of attempted murder. Jasper Clare, too, had roused from the dangerous stupor into which the cunning lies of the false Paul Norris flung him, and was already shewing what marvels a perfect constitution can work.

Unless matters took another unfavorable turn, he bade fair to recover from his desperate wound before many weeks rolled by.

He gained strength so rapidly that on the next evening his doctor gave permission for the interview with Major Wilcox and Dandy Andy to take place. Deacon Jones, though doing better than might have been expected, was hardly able to stand a removal, but he had told his story in full, signing it after the whole was written out, and armed with this confession, our two friends paid their visit to the Boss of Tip-Top.

There is no particular need of fully reporting what passed between the parties on that night, since so much of the truth had already been recorded.

Jasper Clare listened in grim silence while that confession was being read to him, his pale face showing very little emotion, though he must have known that the end would be his losing the girl whom he had for so long treated, called and considered his own child.

At the end of that reading, he frankly admitted the truth of the confession, so far as he himself was concerned. He had adopted a daughter under just such circumstances. He had changed his name from Frank Hartley to Jasper Clare. Why, it concerned no one but himself. That adopted daughter was the same now called Jessamine Clare. And now—as he felt both tired and sleepy, would the gentlemen be so kind as to excuse him from entertaining them longer?

It took several days to make everything stand out clear and distinct, leaving no shadow of doubt as to the rightful heiress being found. In the end, however, everybody was perfectly satisfied.

Deacon Jones secured the rich reward promised him, though Dandy Andy declared it far too much; but Major Wilcox was not to be shaken. He had passed his word while in bonds; now he was free and perfectly happy, he would not repudiate it.

Deacon Jones set at rest all doubts as to the man who was left at Omaha, in the hospital. His story had been truthful. Deacon Jones was the "partner" referred to. And Major Wilcox declared that the fellow should be richly rewarded, even though he had but partially performed the duty agreed upon.

Both Clare and Jones recovered from their wounds, the latter selling his saloon and drifting no one seemed to know whither. The former resigned all claims on Jessamine, but presenting her with a rich dowry without saying a word against Mark Mason. And—little more than a year later, he left her his entire fortune, by will, dying from an accident at one of his mines.

Long before that time "the Twins" bade adieu forever to Tip-Top, going toward the rising sun in company with Major Wilcox and Dandy Andy. The major made what reparation lay in his power to the sole surviving child of Manton Legere, and over the grassy grave of the wife who had sinned so deeply through her maternal love, Jessamine and the prematurely aged husband clasped hands as they breathed a mutual prayer of forgiveness.

Of course there were wedding-bells—what story is complete without them?

Mark Mason married Jessamine Legere, and Andrew Griffin took the blushing Annie for his bride.

"That's all right, little woman," Dandy Andy laughingly assented when Annie begged him to abandon his perilous profession. "I made up my mind to do so, long ago. Ever since I discovered how lamentably I failed at Tip-Top! Could I ever hold up my head again in the ranks after that fiasco?"

"Are you sorry, Andrew?"

"Well, hardly! Because, don't you see, if I lost an heiress, I won a wife! And—I like the wife ever so much better!"

And Uncle Billy?

He was never seen after his hasty flight from the sight of Paul Norris, as described at the time. No doubt he fell into Roaring Fork while drunk, and was drowned.

Sally Bunch still lives with Annie and Andrew, but she has never again dared to kiss the detective, though she has learned to like him fairly well: "But he's an exception, you know!"

THE END.

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